The Importance of Positive Teacher/Student Relationships

Creating and maintaining positive relationships with students is the single most effective way to maximize a student’s potential for learning. The relationship that a student has with his or her teacher is extremely powerful in shaping a student’s level of motivation and overall attitude within the classroom.

Maintaining a positive relationship with a student creates the best environment in which to learn academic material, and also enables students to gain confidence and learn more about themselves. Having a safe environment and good relationship with a nurturing teacher builds a child’s character and resilience for dealing with the outside world.

A recent study in the *British Journal of Guidance & Counseling*; published November 2008, drew on qualitative data from an Australian longitudinal study from 1997-2005. This study identified the ordinary, everyday, relational, 'little things' that teachers do to nurture and promote a positive classroom environment. The study briefly uses Giddens’ structuration theory to validate the study of micro-level relationships between teachers and students. The study utilized the personal experiences of students to show how the relationship with their teacher is of utmost importance in building a child’s resilience. The data suggests how great of an influence teachers have upon a child’s level of resilience.

The results of the study found that when students had a positive relationship with their teacher, they were better able to endure life challenges. A child’s overall level of resilience was shown to increase when placed in an environment in which the student felt a positive relationship with their teacher. This study reinforces the importance of a positive student-teacher relationship and suggests the bond between student and teacher has the potential to reinforce or transform school structures to create a more positive atmosphere, which in turn supports student resilience.

It is difficult to maintain a relationship with every student in one’s classroom. Many students feel that they are not receiving enough individual attention from their teacher, and will act out accordingly. If a positive, meaningful relationship can be formed with every student, the chance of a student acting out within the classroom will be greatly diminished. This is much easier said than done, especially if there are a large number of students within a classroom. Making a concerned effort to form a positive relationship with each and every child will increase the chance that the child will learn and remember the material and will decrease the chance that the child will act out.

The creation of a positive relationship between teacher and student serves as a tool to find a child’s maximum potential, and is especially effective at getting the most out of challenging students. A positive rapport with a difficult student helps the student gain motivation while acquiring respect and goodwill toward the teacher and the learning process as a whole. This mutual respect between student and teacher is very helpful in diffusing or preventing unwanted behavior. A difficult student is more apt to weigh the consequences of their actions, as well as the possibility of disappointing their teacher that they regard so highly when a positive relationship is present between the student and their teacher.

When a student does not have a good relationship with their teacher, they are not as aware, or concerned of how their actions will affect the student-teacher relationship, since there is not a good relationship there to begin with. When a student feels a mutual positive relationship with their teacher, they are more motivated to maintain that positive rapport, which makes them less likely to act out or cause problems within the classroom.

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John, a very difficult student has two teachers. One teacher is responsible for the subjects of science/math and the other teacher is responsible for literature/humanities. John’s science/math teacher is Mr. Cole. Mr. Cole has taken the time to form a positive rapport with John. John’s literature/humanities teacher is Mr. Ray. Mr. Ray has not made forming relationships with his students a priority within the classroom.

John is having a difficult time at home because his parents are going through a nasty divorce. John is upset, afraid and angry and begins to act out at school as a way to express his emotions surrounding his parent’s divorce. John begins acting out equally in both classrooms by talking to girls during the lesson and making snide comments under his breath.

When John misbehaves in the classroom, Mr. Cole reacts by looking at John in a stern manner, which immediately helps to diffuse John’s behavior. This simple diffusion of unwanted behavior occurs because John feels a connection to Mr. Cole and does not want to disappoint or damage the positive relationship between them. When John acts out in Mr. Ray’s class, Mr. Ray gives him a stern look, which John does not respond to, but instead ignores. Mr. Ray then proceeds to verbally warn John to stop his behavior. John continues to ignore Mr. Ray and escalates his behavior because he does not care much what Mr. Ray thinks of him since there is no prior existing relationship between the two. John continues to act out in Mr. Ray’s class and Mr. Ray eventually has to call John’s parents to inform them of his inappropriate behavior.

This example of John’s two teachers shows the vast difference in diffusing unwanted behavior that can occur depending upon the relationship that is formed between a teacher and his or her student. It is obvious from the above example that Mr. Cole had a much easier time diffusing problem behavior within his classroom based purely on the existing relationship and positive rapport that he had with his student John. Mr. Ray on the other hand spent much more time and negative energy trying to control John’s behavior, and struggled to control John’s behavior since there was not an existing positive relationship between the two.

The creation of a positive relationship with a student can be tricky. The classroom hierarchy must be maintained when forming a relationship with a student. It is important to remember when forming a student-teacher relationship that you are not the student’s friend, you are their teacher. Students need to be aware that the teacher has the power within the classroom, and that they must follow the rules that are set by the teacher. Often teachers try to be “cool” and become friends with their students, this does help to form a positive rapport with the student, but undermines the teachers power within the classroom.

Finding a middle ground is essential when forming a relationship with a student. A positive rapport can go a long way in increasing a student’s motivation, increasing productivity and diffusing and preventing unwanted behavior. When a student feels a positive connection with their teacher they are more motivated to continue to foster that relationship and seek more and more positive reinforcement. Maintaining a good relationship between a student and teacher builds upon itself and continues to strengthen over time.