

TEACHER CARING

STUDENTS ENGAGE MORE DEEPLY IN THEIR WORK WHEN THEY FEEL LIKE THEIR TEACHER LIKES AND CARES ABOUT THEM

“The things that matter most to your students might seem like the grade they receive or the things they learned to help them prepare for their future, but the one thing they’ll be sure to remember is whether or not you cared.”

Marianne Asay, Teacher

Almost every student has a personal story about a teacher who seemed to really care (or who really didn’t care). For some, it’s a teacher who reached out and helped them feel comfortable and seen in school. For others, it’s a teacher who helped them see they could reach a higher standard, even when they doubted themselves. Sometimes it’s the story of someone who just listened. These stories show how relationships and acts of care can create a positive atmosphere that brings out the best in students.

Research confirms that students’ relationships with their teachers affect motivation and learning outcomes. A teacher who makes students feel heard, valued, and respected shows students that the classroom is a fair and supportive place where they can grow and succeed. It makes students want to do better.

Even though most educators care about their students, they do not always communicate that caring in a way that students necessarily notice. For example, students may not always see the long hours their teachers put in grading papers. Even if they did, they might not make the connection between their teacher’s hard work and their teacher’s care for them as a person.

This guide focuses on three principles of Teacher Caring:

1. Get to know your students as people
2. Let students know they matter to you
3. Address disciplinary problems with empathy

Measuring Teacher Caring | See the [measurement section](#) at the end of this guide for practical resources that educators can use to measure teacher caring.



Principle One | Get to know students as people

“Every child deserves a champion; an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.”

Rita Pierson, Teacher

A personal conversation with a student—especially one who is struggling—can be a great way to get to know them and build a relationship that will help them feel more confident and motivated. It makes a huge difference to feel like “someone’s got your back.”

Keep in mind, some students will be harder to reach because they will come to class with negative expectations about teachers’ intentions. In some cases, those expectations exist because of their own prior experiences. In others cases, they come from negative stories they’ve heard from friends, family, or the media.

The good news is that teachers who consistently reach out and engage with students and their interests can create a more positive narrative. Teachers can help students see that, in their class, students are seen for the people they are—not as test scores or stereotypes. That can be a powerful experience that sticks with students and benefits them for a long time to come.

Practices

- Welcome students individually when they come to class.
- Ask individual students about their interests outside of school.
- Incorporate individual students’ interests in class assignments, word problems, projects, etc.
- Develop a family communication routine; this might include home visits at the beginning of the year or weekly phone calls.

Try | Establish a Welcome Routine

“Every day, [my teacher] shakes our hand and asks us how we’re doing. He demonstrates a genuine caring for us and our wellbeing.”

Student Participant

OBJECTIVE:

Create a supportive, welcome routine that is authentic and helps establish your classroom as an environment of trust and respect.

STEPS:

1. To develop an authentic welcome routine that works well in your context, consider common, effective features:

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- a. Greet students at the door with purpose. Consider non-verbal gestures like a handshake, eye contact, a smile and speaking to students as they enter.
 - b. Observe students as they enter the room. Notice how students walk in, whether they have their head held up, a smile, or make eye contact. It may take some time to make meaning of your observations, but start with learning how to notice.
 - c. Ask students to share something about themselves and what they're bringing to your class as they enter. It can be a simple thumbs up or down to represent how they're feeling or question they share on a post-it.
2. Consider what would work well with your students. Would silence or non-verbal cues set the right tone in your classroom, or would an enthusiastic greeting get your students excited to learn?
 3. Set a goal to try one new thing as part of your welcoming routine for the week. For example, try being present at the door each day, if that would be a new addition to your practice.
 4. Take a moment to reflect on what you tried at the end of the week. Consider how students responded.
 5. Ask students for feedback on the welcome routines and what worked well and what they might want to change.

This activity is adapted from the “Authentically Connect with Your Students Toolkit” by Sevenzo & PERTS.

Reflect

Think of a professional learning experience where you felt welcomed into the space. What made you feel welcomed?

Explore

- Read: [Morning Meeting: A Powerful Way to Begin the Day](#) by Responsive Classroom
- Use: [Authentically Connect with Your Students Toolkit](#) by Sevenzo & PERTS
- Use: Learning Students Names by University of Nebraska-Lincoln
- Watch: [Making Sure Each Child Is Known](#) by Edutopia

Principle Two | Let students know they matter to you

“To check in each day, I made a small whiteboard for each student that they get to write on as they enter my room. They get to write about anything that’s going on and anything they want to talk about that day. I modeled this practice for students initially, and also wrote something myself 2-3 times a week, like “I made chili over the weekend and it was really yummy.” They tend to mimic the same topic that I do. We learn a lot about one another and find ways to connect. We also did a survey at the start of the year. We all took it, including me, and learned what we had in common. It was really neat to hear the things we had in common with one another.”

Kevin Cox, Teacher, 8th Grade Special Education

Imagine the teachers who spend all Sunday in a coffee shop lesson planning or who get to school before the building is unlocked to get a jump on sending documents to the printer queue. It’s easy to assume that these educators care about the students they teach. Without intentional and explicit communication of that care, however, it could easily go unnoticed, and it generally does: in surveys of over 100,000 youth, the Search Institute found that only 33 percent of 6th graders strongly agreed that their teachers really care about them, and less than half that felt the same in high school.

Meanwhile, research on developmental relationships has shown that students who report stronger relationships with their teacher have higher GPAs, feel more connected to their schools, are more likely to feel culturally respected and included, and even rate the instruction they receive as high quality. These relationships have several components -- including aspects covered in the Feedback for Growth, Student Voice, and Supportive Teaching Guides-- but one crucial aspect is letting students know you care about them.

Practices

- Pay attention to students when they are talking to you about things that matter to them (no phones!) and be intentional about letting them know you remember what they said.
- Proactively check in with students when you notice atypical behavior or if they have shared with you that are going through something, rather than waiting for them to bring it up.
- Strive to understand and show sensitivity to students’ feelings.
- Laugh with students and find the fun amid practical tasks.
- Follow through on any promises or commitments you make to students, and be honest when you fall short.
- Tell students you enjoy working with them.

Try | Everything We Have In Common Survey

OBJECTIVE:

Regularly gather information from students *and yourself* about your lives and interests.

Often these surveys are thought of as beginning of the year, “getting to know you” activities -- and that is definitely a great place to start! -- but they can be so much more than that. They can be administered regularly throughout the year and the cadence you choose can dictate the types of questions you choose to ask. Perhaps you hand out a new survey as the seasons change and you can ask questions about students’ holiday traditions or favorite seasonal activities. You can hand out surveys at the beginning of a new unit and get a sense for students’ interest in related topics. At the beginning of each quarter or semester you can check in on goals and ask about the latest popular show. The answers you gather can be used for everything from inspiration for future units to simple incorporation into assignments to simply inspiring discussions about similarities and differences among the class. The options are endless and ultimately depend on the information uncovered.

STEPS:

1. Determine your survey timeline - will this be a beginning of the year survey, or a beginning of the [fill in the blank] survey, or perhaps an end of [fill in the blank] survey?
2. Write your survey, keeping in mind the cadence you chose.
 - a. The survey shouldn’t be too long (about 10 questions).
 - b. Include a variety of questions:
 1. Questions where you believe there will be overlap in answers (e.g. favorite color, number of siblings, birth month)
 2. Preference questions (e.g. salty or sweet, fractions or decimals, dog or cat)
 3. “Would you rather” questions (e.g. Would you rather time travel back to Ancient Greece or Egypt? Would you rather be [this character] or [that character]? Would you rather be an amazing singer or dancer?)
 4. Questions that can be answered easily in just a few words (e.g. favorite holiday meal, super power you would want)
 5. Questions with longer answers (e.g. “Tell me about a time you...” “What do you like about [fill in the blank]?”)
 - c. Ensure that there is a level of trust and comfort established before asking questions that might be considered personal.
3. Let students know:
 - a. How you plan to use this survey (e.g. driving conversations among the class, inspiring future units, incorporating information into assignments, etc.)
 - b. Whether results will be released and if they will be anonymous or not

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- c. That you will also be completing the survey
4. Administer survey.
5. Reveal results (where appropriate).
6. Implement plan for using results.

Reflect

What are your favorite strategies to show students that you care?

Explore

- Read: [What We're Learning about Developmental Relationships](#) by Search Institute
- Read: [Active Listening](#) by MindTools
- Read: [Student-Led Conferences](#) by EL Education
- Use: [Ensure Students Feel Heard Toolkit](#) by Sevenzo & PERTS

Principle Three | Address disciplinary problems with empathy

“One time when I got in trouble in 7th grade, I still remember how my teacher took me aside later and listened to my side of the story. She repeated what I said back to me to be sure she understood what I was saying. Then she explained why she still had to give me detention because I was disrupting class. Even though I got a detention, I was glad that she didn’t just dismiss what I had to say, like other teachers sometimes did. After that, I actually felt better in school because I knew I had someone to talk to.”

A high school student, reflecting on middle school

Some days it may be easier to show caring for students than others. Many educators say that some of the greatest challenges they face—and some of the greatest opportunities for helping students—occur after students misbehave.

Disciplinary situations can be difficult because they often touch on students’ sensitivities. Students worry about being treated unfairly, and they are sensitive to any sign that others—especially authority figures, like teachers—are treating them unfairly. These worries can cause students to experience stress, to overreact, and to disengage from school. Some students have additional reasons to worry about authority figures treating them unfairly. For instance, students of color may be especially sensitive to signs of bias or disrespect because of systemic discrimination they have been subjected to in other contexts.

Regardless of a student’s identity, it is essential to be curious and come across as fair, caring, and respectful. Handled the right way, disciplinary encounters can offer teachers rich opportunities to talk with students and build trust. Sometimes, the most emotionally honest conversations that teachers have with their students are conversations about misbehavior.

Practices

- Avoid “power struggles.” Talk to students in private when they get in trouble, give them time to “cool down” and remove any pressure they may feel to be defiant in front of classmates.
- Convey to students that their views and feelings matter to you by giving them the opportunity to explain their perspective and articulate why they misbehaved. Even when you may disagree or have to take disciplinary action, take the time to listen and communicate that you want to understand them and/or the situation.
- Actively work to maintain your own growth mindset and empathetic stance regarding student misbehavior.

Try this | Consider Your Own Mindset

OBJECTIVE:

When addressing challenging behavior, actively work to maintain your own growth mindset regarding students and their choices. Be curious — about yourself, your perspective, and your students' lived experiences and perspectives.

Instead of assuming that a student is purposely refusing to cooperate, consider that you may not know all that is happening in this student's life and experiences.

STEPS:

1. When you notice challenging behavior occurring, stop yourself before you assign a negative consequence.
2. Isolate the behavior you are expecting from the student(s) that they aren't showing.
3. Consider what skills or behaviors the student(s) has potential develop that they can internalize.
4. Provide in-the-moment, positive coaching/instructions for the student(s) on the behaviors or skills they need in a way demonstrates your belief that they can complete the given task and conveys that you are not angry.
5. Once the situation has passed, reflect on the ways you can set students up for success in the future by focusing on what is within your locus of control. You can do this by:
 - a. Modifying the environment in ways that increase the desired behaviors.
 - b. Providing the instruction and opportunities for practice necessary for students to engage in desired behaviors.
 - c. Consider any teacher actions that were precursors to the student actions you observed and determine how you could adjust your own behaviors.
6. Continue to reinforce good behaviors through positive feedback and praise.

Reflect

Think about a specific student behavior. What mindsets do you believe led the student(s) to engage in that behavior? What teacher actions do you believe you took (or didn't take) that contributed to the creation of those mindsets? What mindsets do you have that led to your actions?

Explore

- Read: [Helping Students Return to Class After Discipline Issues](#) by Edutopia
- Read: [Tell Me About.. A Change You Made That's Helped Support Students' Mental Health](#) by Educational Leadership in ASCD
- Read: [Mindsets Impact Perceptions Of Student Behavior](#) by Dustin Bindreiff at Mindset Works

MEASUREMENT

Surveys can be used to measure teacher caring. The Cultivate survey provides leaders and teachers with a schoolwide snapshot of classroom environments and student mindsets while the Elevate survey gives teachers their own feedback.

CULTIVATE ITEMS

- This teacher is really good at relating to kids.
- This teacher cares about my life outside of school.
- This teacher greets each student by name when we come to class.
- This teacher builds one-on-one relationships with each student in this class.
- This teacher makes sure we know how much they enjoy working with us.
- This teacher treats me with respect.

ELEVATE ITEMS

- I feel like this teacher is glad that I am in their class.
 - This teacher cares about my life outside of school.
 - This teacher treats me with respect.
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ENDNOTES

Bindreiff, Dustin. "Mindsets Impact Perceptions of Student Behavior." *Mindset Works*, <http://blog.mindsetworks.com/entry/behavior-is-learned>

Search Institute, What We're Learning about Developmental Relationships <https://www.search-institute.org/developmental-relationships/learning-developmental-relationships/>