

Teaching through relationships

by [Theresa Pfister](#)
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It was my first month of teaching and it wasn't going particularly well. A native Midwesterner, I laughed loudly and smiled easily, two of the worst possible things a new teacher could do.

"Your lesson was *good*," my coach told me, "but you're coming off as *too warm. Too friendly.*"

"I—"

"They're going to walk all over you."

"I—"

"You're here to teach them, right?"

I nodded.

"Then stop trying to be their friend, and be their boss."

If you're a teacher, you've likely heard similar advice: *No excuses. Don't let them see you sweat. Show them whose classroom it is. Don't let them undermine your authority.* All this well-meaning advice has one common message: There's only one way to teach, and it's by exerting power over ourselves, our students, and our classrooms. But what if there is another way?

A different way to teach and learn

Too often I fear we educators are expected to put aside our humanity and the humanity of our students to make our classroom look a certain way, teach the lesson as written, and achieve the test scores. All of us—and this includes our students—are told to hide our vulnerabilities, our eccentricities, our preferences, and even our strengths unless they fit into a narrow vision of teaching and learning. Teacher as knowledge holders, students as passive receivers.

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As we contort to fit these roles, we forget what research has affirmed and what we know deep in our marrow to be true: The only way to teach and to learn is through relationships.

What the research says

Research has firmly established that positive teacher-student relationships—those defined by respect, support, and care—contribute to positive short- and long-term outcomes for students. One study found that at-risk students who had more positive relationships with teachers also had more positive outcomes in social, behavioral, engagement, and academic realms. Other research showed

that positive relationships in kindergarten supported behavioral and academic performance eight years later.

Whether you're a brand-new teacher or a veteran, whether you work with toddlers or emerging adults, the positive relationships you build with your students are key to a supportive, successful classroom. This association is so clear that the American Psychological Association asked my advisor, Dr. Sara Rimm-Kaufman, to write a module on it, citing research and best practices.

Building relationships with each student

The quest to learn how teachers can build positive, mutually beneficial relationships with students led me to my doctoral studies, and while I still haven't landed on the perfect formula (look out for my dissertation in a few years), I have discovered a wealth of knowledge from educators, students, and researchers for how to support each other in this challenging, necessary work. Here are some tips I have found to be the most impactful in my own work as an educator:

- **Relationships start with something as simple as knowing you have a single thing in common.** A 2016 study from Harvard found that simply creating a survey to find matching interests between teachers and their ninth-grade students at the beginning of the year predicted better relationships throughout the year. This shift effectively eliminated the achievement gap for underserved youth by 60 percent.
- **Do what your brain is designed to do: empathize.** Human beings are wired for empathy, and we can use this superpower to understand and respond to students' needs. For instance, I applied empathy when I found myself irritated as tardy students slid into the classroom, avoiding eye contact. As I remembered their commute and the unreliability of the trains, I quietly welcomed them and incorporated them into the lesson. More often than not, they would find me after class to explain what had happened and to ask for what they had missed.
- **Recognize that affective empathy alone has its limits.** A 2014 study about responses to others in pain indicated that we find it easier to empathize affectively with those who are like us. I see this finding as a call to action. We must *practice* empathy with effort, care, and attention to our explicit and implicit biases. There are many great ways to do this, including reading and learning more about people, perspectives, and cultures different from our own.
- **Remember that trust takes time.** As Brené Brown describes in her metaphor of the jar of marbles, trust is built through small, repeated actions over time. Through relationships, we add marbles one at a time to fill our students' jars. The way we do that differs for each student, but examples include allowing them to start fresh every day, asking about their families, remembering something they shared. Pay attention – they'll show you what they need.

Looking back at my first year of teaching, I'm glad I trusted my gut and continued to laugh and smile – a lot. This decision has led to beautiful and transformative connections with hundreds of students who not only learned, but taught me incredible lessons, too.

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