

Understanding and Appropriately Responding to Student Perspectives

In order to build effective working relationships with our students, it is critical that we understand where they are coming from and how they view the world, including school. This is not to say that we are agreeing with inappropriate or potentially dangerous choices/lifestyles in which they engage, but rather acknowledging that their worldview likely differs from ours. This is a first step in building rapport with students of all backgrounds. Below are some specific things to keep in mind when working with each student in our school...

1) **There may be a general mistrust of authority figures, including school staff.**

This is often due to previous negative experiences students and parents have encountered over the years, leading to a misperception that all authority figures have an ulterior motive that is not in the student's best interest. Such experiences may include corporal punishment within the school setting, derogatory statements from past teachers that is perceived as attacking the student on a personal level, and/or experiencing/witnessing police brutality. It is important that we maintain professionalism and dignity for ourselves as well as our students and show them, through our actions, that we want to support them and help them achieve success, academically and personally.

2) **Sometimes being overly nice and positive can come off as disingenuous.**

Yes, it is important to be positive and polite with our students, but we also need to come across as genuine and sincere in our approach. Sometimes this means providing praise privately (not in front of other students) and without being over-enthusiastic when praising our students. In addition, some students very rarely experience hearing positive statements from adults, so they may respond negatively. Be persistent and keep providing realistic, specific, and matter-of-fact verbal praise to all students, so that each student can learn to appropriately accept such positive statements as being genuine.

3) **Students often think we, as adults, cannot possibly understand where they are coming from or what they are dealing with.**

And sometimes we truly cannot understand what our students have been through, but we can try to reach out and attempt to understand. How do you achieve this? Listen to your students' stories. Demonstrate an interest in their stories and compassion in the obstacles they have or are currently trying to overcome. Provide them opportunities to share and learn from one another. Share your own stories of struggle and perseverance (in a professional and appropriate manner and only if you feel comfortable doing so). Taking the time on the frontend to get to know your students will lead to less of a need to react in a negative or punitive manner regarding behavior difficulties.

4) **Students are often embarrassed and/or shameful of academic failure, and thus, act out instead.**

No one likes to look like they are stupid or do not know what they are doing. When students have continually struggled in school, the last thing they want is to keep bringing their failures to the attention of their peers or teachers. They would rather look tough and in control, which often leads to acting out and causing a disruption in class. As teachers, be sure to talk to students in private about academic (and behavioral) struggles, rather than calling them out in front of the class, and verbalize to them that you are here to help them make progress, that you are available if and when they need your support.

5) **Students do not always feel that teachers and/or other authority figures really care about their well-being.**

These feelings may stem from a variety of factors, including a focus on tests and grades over social and emotional well-being, being told to leave the classroom for what they perceive to be minor behavior infractions, and/or teachers not appearing as approachable and empathic. Regardless of the validity behind such perceptions, when students perceive us as unapproachable and uncaring, we have to take a step back and think about why this may be and how we can change this perspective. Taking even just a couple of minutes to discuss non-academic topics or interests can demonstrate to our students that we do, in fact, care about their well-being and who they are as a person. In addition, if students are not causing a disruption in your class, keep them in the classroom. This is the ultimate goal – to keep our students in the classroom and educate them to the best of our ability. Sometimes the simple fact that the student made it to class, even if he/she is not engaged in the task at-hand, is a step in the right direction.

Being aware of how our students perceive us is the first step in good behavior management and academic progress. The next important step is building relationships with our students – if there is nothing else we can do, the one thing that research has consistently shown in improving school climate and connectedness is with respect to building effective working relationships with our students. How can we build better relationships with our students?

- 1) Learn each of your students' names and how to pronounce and spell names correctly.
- 2) Greet each student as they come into your classroom, even if he/she is late. We want them to know that we want them in class.
- 3) Show an interest in students' activities, hobbies, or other interests not related to school.
- 4) Recognize achievement, improvement, and effort given, in addition to successes (i.e., going from an F to a C versus high grades overall; taking time to attend tutorials).
- 5) Encourage open, respectful communication about differing viewpoints.
- 6) Reach out to students who otherwise appear disengaged and/or exhibit challenging behaviors. Get to know them and see how you may be able to provide support academically and/or socially.
- 7) Stay calm and positive during all interactions, including those that involve challenging behaviors. Avoid power struggles, as this only escalates behavior problems. Remind students of academic and behavioral expectations and possible consequences of their actions.
- 8) Model and practice appropriate behaviors that you expect from your students.
- 9) Admit to mistakes made – this often leads to improved credibility and that you are a human being, just like your students.