

# Creating a Positive Learning Environment through Building Relationships

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“In a positive learning environment, students thrive, teachers excel, and communities succeed”  
Michael Fullan

Building positive relationships with students, teachers, staff and families is vital. When there is mutual respect, trust and communication, students feel supported and valued. Strong relationships also contribute to a sense of belonging, which leads to increased motivation, engagement, and ultimately academic achievement.

**Interact with students daily.** It is so easy to get caught up in paperwork or unexpected disruptions, but being around students is where the magic happens. My best relationship building experiences are at recess. Every day, I get out at various recess times. Much to the detriment of my knees, I’ve played basketball, 4 square, kickball, jumped rope, or just sat on the grass with students. I’m able to build connections with my “frequent flyers,” as we play and talk. When I have taken the time to build connections with students and a difficult situation comes up, working with parents and students goes smoother because the trust has been built.

Visiting classrooms is another way to build connections with students. A few years ago, I came across a website (<https://learninginhand.com/blog/print-custom-sticky-notes-with-google-slides>) that showed how to make custom Post-it notes. I created some “I Noticed” Post-it notes and as I visited the classroom I would observe students working and write a note, leaving it on the student’s desk as I exited the classroom. The notes usually said things such as how I noticed how hard they were trying, great work they were doing with a partner, or perhaps a good response they added to a class discussion. The students loved it. Often, they would find me later and say thank you. Once in a while, I would have a parent reach out and tell me how much their child appreciated the note.

**Reach out to parents.** When I started out as a principal, I had a mentor give me some great advice. She asked me if I wanted to be the positive or negative gossip at the Saturday soccer games or the Sunday services. She then had me do a weekly activity she called Friday Parent

PR. Every Friday, I would reach out to 3-5 different parents. My phone call wasn't just about academics. I would mention how I observed their child help another student or how I observed them interact with their teacher. Sometimes, I would even share how I interacted with their child at recess.

Often, when I called and stated who I was, there was a long pause. Parents were expecting a negative phone call. One interaction resulted in a mom initially saying "I haven't heard from you in a while, Ms. Wright. What's happening now? Do I need to come to school and get him?" I then shared some positive things happening with this particular student. We then had a great conversation, which created a turning point for her son during the last few years of elementary school and he was able to enter into 7th grade stronger socially and academically.

**Create opportunities to have staff play.** When a school staff feels connected through relationships, they love being at school. People are more likely to collaborate with one another and in turn improve student learning. Over the years, I've discovered the more I can have aides, teachers, and support staff "play" together they will work better together because they know and trust each other.

Every August when it is time to do staff training, I make sure I have some type of activity to mix all staff together. I've done scavenger hunts around the building, nearpod activities, and escape rooms just to name a few. I found this helps staff work together to problem solve and learn about one another outside of the typical academic/behavioral discussions.

At my current school, the staff connects with one another through a variety of activities. They have a book club that promotes camaraderie. Once in a while, there will be a note on the faculty room board to go to a movie together, meet up for dinner, or see a colleague perform. They will sometimes do an after school 20-minute game play. During this time, they will meet up in our community room and play a quick game for 20 minutes to laugh and get a reset from the day.

During this year, we did bingo in October, with a daily picture text and dollar store prizes, secret elf in December, and steal the palm tree before spring break. The last one entailed stealing and keeping a 4 foot inflatable palm tree in your room with prizes for the most steals and the last person to have it on the last day heading into spring break. All of these activities create stronger connections amongst staff.

Creating a positive learning environment through relationships is an ongoing process. It requires consistent effort and has to be intentional. When I set a goal and make a plan to connect with others I see collaboration increase, which leads to an overall sense of well-being and success in my school environment.

