

Creating a Positive Learning Environment at School: The Power of Relationships, PBIS, and Zones of Regulation



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Growing up, we had a good family friend that was a real estate agent. She would say that the three most important things in real estate are location, location, location. That stuck with me. Why was the location so important? Why was the location of a property more important than the building on said property? She explained that the building could be updated, but that the location was most important. Like real estate, there are aspects of education that can be updated. Through professional development, data analysis, and coaching, educators can “update” their practice to better meet the needs of their students. However, more important than all of those things are relationships. The three most important things in education are relationships, relationships, relationships.

The Three Prong Approach

Along with building meaningful relationships with students, creating systems that support the social and emotional well-being of students is paramount. At Riverside, we use a three prong approach to teaching social and emotional skills. First, we focus on relationships. Second, we use an evidence-based emotional awareness and self regulation program called Zones of Regulation. Finally, we implement Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) with fidelity. The symbiosis of these three prongs allows for teaching, learning, and implementation of evidence-based wellness practices.

1. The Power of Relationships:

Establishing strong relationships between students, teachers, and staff is crucial for a positive learning environment. When students feel valued and supported, they are

more likely to engage actively in the learning process. Encouraging open communication, active listening, and empathy helps foster trust and connection within the school community. Teachers can achieve this by taking the time to get to know their students individually, showing genuine interest in their lives, and creating a safe space for sharing thoughts and concerns. Building trust can also be facilitated through team-building activities, icebreakers, and classroom meetings that promote community and collaboration. Among the most important relationships is that between the teacher and student.

Developing positive student-teacher relationships is pivotal in creating a conducive learning environment. Teachers can establish rapport by showing genuine interest in students' well-being, recognizing their strengths, and offering support when needed. Building mutual respect and providing constructive feedback fosters a sense of belonging and encourages academic growth. Teachers can also incorporate student interests and perspectives into their lessons, creating a more personalized and engaging learning experience. By being approachable and supportive, teachers create an environment where students feel comfortable seeking help and guidance. As important as the student-teacher relationship is the peer relationship.

Promoting positive peer relationships enables students to learn from one another and develop crucial social skills. Implementing collaborative activities, group projects, and team-building exercises encourages cooperation, empathy, and respect among students. A supportive peer network contributes to a safe and inclusive learning environment where students feel comfortable expressing themselves. Teachers can facilitate this by encouraging teamwork, teaching conflict resolution skills, and promoting a classroom culture of kindness and inclusivity. Opportunities for cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and collaborative problem-solving allow students to interact positively and build meaningful connections with their peers.

2. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS):

PBIS is an evidence-based framework that focuses on proactive strategies to promote positive behavior and create a supportive learning environment. It is based on the understanding that students require explicit instruction, clear expectations, and consistent reinforcement to develop and exhibit positive behaviors. The key components of PBIS include:

a. Clearly defined expectations: Schools should establish clear, concise, and positively phrased behavior expectations that are consistently communicated to all students.

These expectations should be taught explicitly, reinforced regularly, and acknowledged when demonstrated by students.

b. Positive reinforcement: PBIS emphasizes the use of positive reinforcement to encourage desired behaviors. This can be achieved through a variety of strategies, such as verbal praise, tangible rewards, or acknowledgment systems like a school-wide token economy.

c. Data-driven decision-making: Schools implementing PBIS collect and analyze data to identify areas of improvement, track progress, and make informed decisions. By monitoring behavior trends, schools can implement targeted interventions and provide additional support to students who may require it.

d. Consistent consequences: PBIS promotes a fair and consistent approach to addressing challenging behaviors. Schools should have a tiered system of consequences that is consistently applied, ensuring a sense of fairness while holding students accountable for their actions.

Implementing PBIS in schools fosters a positive and respectful school climate, reduces disciplinary issues, and enhances students' social and emotional well-being.

3. Zones of Regulation:

The Zones of Regulation is a framework that helps students recognize and regulate their emotions and self-regulatory behaviors. It categorizes emotions into four color-coded zones: the Green Zone (calm and focused), the Blue Zone (sad, tired, or sick), the Yellow Zone (frustrated, anxious, or excited), and the Red Zone (angry, aggressive, or out of control). By understanding and identifying their emotions within these zones, students can develop effective strategies to manage their behavior and make appropriate choices.

Teachers can integrate the Zones of Regulation into their classrooms by:

a. Teaching emotional awareness: Educating students about different emotions, their triggers, and the corresponding physiological responses helps them develop a vocabulary for their feelings. This enables students to express their emotions effectively and seek support when needed.

b. Providing coping strategies: Teachers can guide students in developing a toolbox of coping strategies for each zone. This can include deep breathing exercises,

mindfulness techniques, physical activity breaks, or seeking adult support. Teaching self-regulation techniques empowers students to navigate challenges and maintain focus on learning.

c. Creating a safe space: Establishing a safe and non-judgmental classroom environment encourages students to openly discuss their emotions and seek help when necessary. Teachers can foster this environment by actively listening, modeling self-regulation, and respecting students' feelings.

A positive learning environment is built upon the foundation of positive relationships, effective behavior management strategies, and self-regulation skills. By prioritizing the development of strong teacher-student and peer relationships, implementing PBIS practices, and integrating the Zones of Regulation framework, schools can create an environment where students feel safe, supported, and motivated to learn. When students' social and emotional needs are met, they are better equipped to succeed academically and develop lifelong skills for personal growth and well-being. Investing in creating a positive learning environment is an investment in the success and happiness of our students.