

HOW TO BUILD CONNECTIONS

BETWEEN YOU and
YOUR STUDENTS
FROM DAY ONE

WE ARE
TEACHERS

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VOYAGER SOPRIS
LEARNING®

No matter what age you teach, relationships are incredibly important for learning, especially when it comes to literacy.



Younger kids who are new to the world of school need to know there's somebody who is looking out for them and who will be patient when they make mistakes. As students get older and the work gets more difficult, kids need the freedom to try and fail, and they need a teacher who will get to know them well enough to recognize when they're struggling, especially as they move into middle school. In a world that often feels counterintuitive for middle schoolers, teachers have the opportunity to make their classroom community a haven for students experiencing lots of physical and emotional changes!

While phonics, vocabulary, and decoding are all crucial skills for reading, teachers can't overlook the social and emotional learning that has to take place for students to grow. In order to read proficiently (as well as succeed in life), students need to be able to take risks, be resilient, and monitor their own learning and emotions. Luckily, you can start building those relationships and skills on the first day of school!

GET-TO-KNOW-YOU ACTIVITIES THAT BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Bring Home into the Classroom.

Ask kids to draw a map of where they live. Have them point out which area is their favorite place for reading, relaxing, and doing homework. Do the activity with them, sharing a bit about your home life as well.

Share Existing Relationships.

Have kids bring in and present pictures of family members—or people who are important to them—and then display the pictures on a wall in your classroom. Be sure to define family as the people who are most important in your students' lives.

Show off What They Know.

Play "Nifty Human Tricks." Have the children brainstorm things they can already do. You go first and show off any cool skills you have, such as the ability to roll your tongue or read 250 words per minute. Then, let kids demonstrate any cool talents they have.

Build on Their Personality Type.

Have kids take a Myers-Briggs assessment to determine their personality type. (You can find these online by searching a phrase such as "Myers-Briggs student version.") Then, let them write about whether their type accurately describes their personality. You'll learn more from their responses than their test results, and they'll learn about themselves.

Find out How They Are More.

Join the **I Am More** movement to acknowledge ability and see the possibility in every student.

Check out the printable poster that you and

your students can fill out. Take pictures of the kids with their posters and hang them around your room, or share your voice on social media using **#IAmMore**.

These pictures act as a reminder that each kid has untapped potential. Get additional **I Am More** resources and ideas [here](#).

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ENCOURAGING RISK-TAKING ACTIVITIES

Reading is a risk, especially when you have an audience. Kids need to have the courage to read out loud in class, to try reading more difficult texts, or to attempt to interpret or critique a text for themselves. If we model risk-taking, talk about it in class, and reward risks even when they don't pan out, we show kids that mistakes are part of learning and that taking on challenges pays off.

GIVE YOUNGER STUDENTS SMALLER RISKS



Provide open-ended assignments.

What makes your students feel inspired creatively? If there's no right or wrong answer, they'll be more likely to share what they really think.



Get out of the classroom.

Field trips, or any natural setting nearby, can take kids out of their comfort zone and encourage them to interact in new and different ways.



Act it out.

Show your students a reader's theater of your class novel or a short story; encourage kids to be silly and get into character.



Celebrate failure.

Remind your students that if they get it right every time, they aren't challenging themselves. Reward the willingness to try something new, rather than consistent success.

OLDER STUDENTS CAN TAKE ON BIGGER RISKS



Build a culture of respect for all.

It's not the open laughter and comments you have to worry about—it's the giggling, the whispering, the eye-rolling, and the unwelcoming body language. Call these out every time you see them so your students know they are safe from bullying in your class and that bullying behavior will not be tolerated.



Be vulnerable.

Share your own fears, failures, or embarrassments when the opportunity arises, and your kids will feel more comfortable with their own.



Make it up as you go.

Improvisation, or improv, is a form of live theater in which the plot, characters, and dialogue of a game, scene, or story are made up in the moment. It's a great way to teach kids to take risks and support each other. If you google improv games, you'll find tons of ideas for using this unique small risk-big idea activity in your classroom!

BUILD RESILIENCE ACTIVITIES

Learning can be frustrating, and most kids make a lot of mistakes on the road to literacy. Teaching kids to recognize signs of frustration and power through helps create lifelong learners who can persevere through challenges.

IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Nonacademic challenges can help kids learn to deal with frustration in a context where the stakes aren't as high. Practicing skills that are above their level and seeing improvement helps them develop a growth mindset and figure out what techniques help them persevere through difficulties. Here are some great nonacademic challenges:



Tongue twisters,
like *She sells seashells by the seashore.*

ESL PRO TIP: The first step to pronunciation mastery? Identifying the issues! They are easier to find with tongue twisters.



Art assignments that require attention to detail and following directions, such as having students draw their backpack or shoe, with teacher guidance.



STEM challenges,
like building a catapult or an egg parachute.

And remember to explicitly teach techniques for dealing with frustration, such as breathing, self-talk, taking a break, and monitoring stress level.

IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Nonacademic challenges work with older kids, too:



Group counting. Invite students to count out loud from 1 to 20 (or higher) as a group without a designated order. This strategy asks students to heighten their awareness of the group, practice patience and listening, and work together to accomplish a challenging group task.



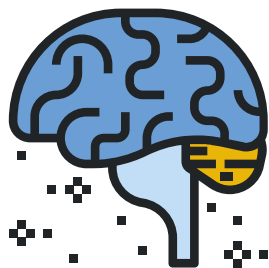
Journaling. Have kids write about their thought process and assess their emotions during an assignment or a project. Help them think analytically about their feelings, rather than be overwhelmed by them. Responding to each journal helps kids feel heard and can help your introverts connect with you in a nonthreatening way.



Yoga breaks. Try a five-minute YouTube yoga brain break before a challenging activity. Have your students assess their stress level before and after.

TEACHING METACOGNITION ACTIVITIES

These strategies work well with every age!



Student-generated stress strategies.

Talk to kids about how they know when stress is present. What does it feel like? How do they calm themselves down? Develop a class-made poster with different strategies to use. Be sure to

identify who came up with each idea, acknowledging your classroom's stress-relief experts.

Slow down and pay attention.

Call attention to the physical symptoms of stress when you see them. If kids are breathing fast, fidgeting excessively, or getting tense, take a few minutes to help them slow their breathing, relax their muscles, and calm down. Calming the body helps calm the mind.

Model metacognition when reading out loud to students.

Narrate your own thinking: "Right now I'm a little confused, because I'm not sure why this character is doing this. I'm not sure if I should go back and read the paragraph again or keep going and see if I figure it out. What do you think?" Praise students who use metacognition when sharing how they solved problems.

Ted Talks

are a great way to teach metacognition. Hearing successful people talk about how they worked through difficulties helps provide strategies for struggling teens, especially if you refer back to the talks when you see a kid having trouble. There are also loads of student Ted Talks, which are great for having kids see their own peers sharing their experiences.



Building Social-Emotional Learning Skills With Every Lesson All Year Long

Throughout the year, starting on the first day of school, consider how to build social-emotional skills in everything your class does. How do you do this? Think about one of the following five SEL categories and ask yourself these questions:

1 Self-awareness. How can the activity help students process their thoughts and feelings and learn how to express them to others?

2 Self-management. How can the activity help students control their emotions and behaviors in different contexts and environments?

3 Social awareness. How can students use this lesson to build on their empathy and understand people from various backgrounds or cultures, as well as internalize social norms of behavior?

4 Responsible decision-making. How can my students make constructive choices about their own behavior and their social interactions?

5 Relationship skills. How can every learning experience build and maintain meaningful relationships with others through active and healthy communication?