Develop techniques and practice

Respectful interactions

Demonstrate respectful interactions to foster positive relationships and belonging

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Students are more likely to engage, actively participate and develop positive dispositions towards learning when they feel accepted and valued. Fostering belonging involves developing student–teacher relationships, as well as students' sense of connection to their school, peers and learning.[1] Belonging is also supported when students feel successful in their learning and that they can rely on you to support their learning.

This practice guide will help you understand how to:

- demonstrate care for students by establishing and maintaining a culture that promotes respect, encouragement and fairness

- demonstrate high expectations for students and provide them with the support they need to progress in their learning

- apply techniques that show students' ideas and identities are valued

- build the foundations for positive relationships with students, their families and communities.

Demonstrate respectful interactions to foster positive relationships and belonging (*Respectful interactions*) is one of 18 interconnected practices in our Teaching for How Students Learn model of learning and teaching. This practice sits in the **Enabling** phase, which focuses on responsive, respectful relationships in a culturally safe, learning-focused environment. This practice is interconnected with:

- **Planning**, which focuses on developing and using a sequenced and structured plan for the knowledge and skills students will acquire

- **Instruction**, which focuses on managing students' cognitive load as they process and acquire new learning

- **Gradual release**, which focuses on maximising students' opportunities to retain, consolidate and apply their learning.

Enabling	Planning	Instruction	Gradual release

Understanding this practice

These lists demonstrate what respectful interactions might look like, and potential misapplications in practice.

✓ What it is

- Promoting and modelling mutual respect, care, encouragement, friendliness and fairness when engaging with students, parents and colleagues.

- Holding high expectations for all students, and providing the supports required to facilitate student learning success.

- Being responsive to student needs, and to the values that students and families hold, even if these are different from your own.

- Recognising and valuing the progress students make towards learning objectives and their own aspirations.

- Establishing a classroom culture where mistakes are understood as part of learning and are acted upon to improve learning and teaching.

- Regularly seeking and acting on feedback from your students, their families, communities and your colleagues.

✕ What it isn't

- Holding high expectations for only some students, based on judgements about students' backgrounds or learning potential.

- Communicating high expectations for students without providing the necessary supports to facilitate students' learning.

- Making assumptions about what motivates students to learn or what their likelihood of learning success is – especially when these assumptions may be based on misconceptions and stereotypes.

- Seeking feedback from students and colleagues without responding to it or addressing issues raised.

- Assuming your ability to form relationships with students is dependent on your personality or being 'friends' with students.

The importance of demonstrating respectful interactions to foster relationships and belonging
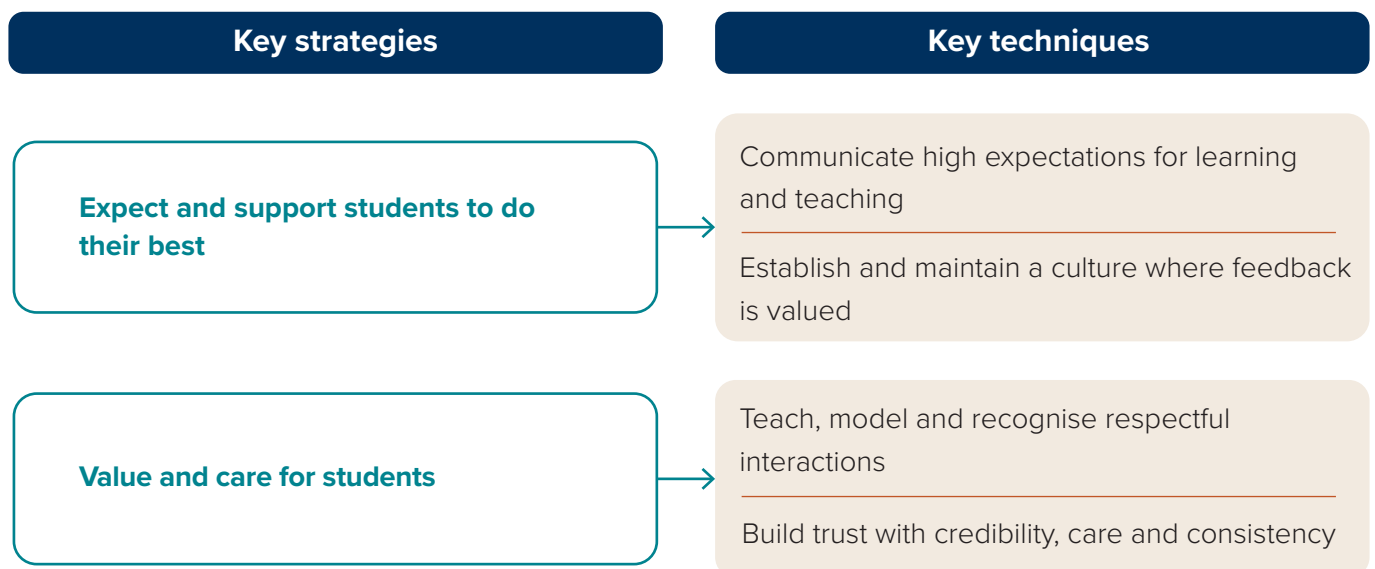
Key points from the research

- When students feel they're accepted, valued and belong, it has a positive impact on their self-efficacy and can lead to:

  - lower absenteeism

  - higher levels of effort, interest and motivation

  - trust in their teachers

  - being willing to attempt more challenging learning activities

  - positive learning dispositions and self-belief in their ability to succeed.[2, 3, 4]

- Norms are patterns of behaviour, interaction, participation and engagement. Teachers' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours can impact norms and affect the quality of their relationships with students.[5] Teachers can influence norms that foster positive relationships and belonging by:

  - creating, teaching and maintaining rules and routines

  - modelling respectful interactions

  - recognising and praising respectful interactions when they occur.

- Showing empathy, valuing students' perspectives, providing consistent classroom management practices and maintaining positive relationships can:

  - strengthen students' perceptions of their teacher and the likelihood they can rely on their teacher for support

  - motivate and help them to adopt behaviours and dispositions that are supportive of learning

  - reduce the need for disciplinary consequences such as suspensions.[6]

- Reflexive practice (reflexivity) is a process that critically examines personal attitudes, values and biases, with a view to engaging with people in a culturally safe manner.[7] This provides a foundation for respectful and responsive relationships.

- Teachers can support positive learning dispositions and motivation by using teaching practices that deliver learning success.[8, 9] This involves sequencing and structuring instruction with clear and relevant learning objectives, scaffolding student learning, providing a desirable level of difficulty and gradually moving students towards independent practice. If learning is not scaffolded effectively, or if students are expected to practise independently too soon after learning new content, they may believe learning is too hard, that they don't have access to the necessary support, that they're not good at learning or that they're not intelligent enough to learn.[10, 11]

- Teachers can affirm the belief that all students are valued and are capable of progressing in their learning by holding and communicating high expectations for their students, using evidence-based teaching to maximise the likelihood of learning success, and being responsive to student needs and concerns as they arise.[12, 13, 14, 15]

- Seeking feedback from students about teaching can demonstrate that students' ideas are valued, inform practice improvement to further support learning needs and contribute to a feedback culture to improve learning.[16, 17, 18]

- When feedback from the teacher isn't framed well, students can interpret it as criticism and that they aren't accepted.[19] 'Task-orientated' rather than 'ego-orientated' feedback is most effective at supporting learning.[20, 21]

Key strategies and techniques

This section identifies evidence-based strategies and techniques (see summary in Figure 1) for creating inclusive classroom environments that foster positive relationships and belonging, where high expectations for students are accompanied by the supports all students require to achieve learning success.

Figure 1: Key strategies and techniques for respectful interactions with students

Key strategies	Key techniques
Expect and support students to do their best	Communicate high expectations for learning and teaching — Establish and maintain a culture where feedback is valued
Value and care for students	Teach, model and recognise respectful interactions — Build trust with credibility, care and consistency

Expect and support students to do their best

Communicate high expectations for learning and teaching

Affirm your belief that all students can experience learning success by:

- communicating high expectations for all students

- demonstrating your commitment to their learning by using evidence-based teaching practices to facilitate students' learning success.

Enable students to achieve high expectations for learning by:

- clearly communicating the learning objective and activating students' prior knowledge so all students understand the purpose of the lesson

- providing high-quality whole-class instruction, using a variety of learning activities and materials, explaining and modelling how students should undertake tasks and scaffolding supports so all students are able to make progress

- frequently checking for understanding to determine who may need additional scaffolding, reteaching or further practice as this is more effective than pre-grouping students to engage in less challenging tasks according to presumed ability or likelihood of learning success

- using your skills to teach and model skills that students can use to regulate their own learning, including how to monitor and reflect on their own progress, using success criteria to identify where they're stuck or what additional support they require

- acknowledging that aspects of learning and specific tasks can be difficult, while reassuring students that you believe they can do it and that you'll support them

- recognising the progress students are making, and establishing, making explicit and reinforcing routines for students to seek assistance as needed.

Establish and maintain a culture where feedback is valued

Provide task-orientated feedback to help students identify what aspects of a task they've done well and, importantly, how to *improve* further or what they should do *next*. Avoid only praising students themselves or only pointing out their mistakes. To support high expectations, the message 'I believe you can do it' should be accompanied by advice explaining 'And here's how you can do it'.[22, 23] Structure your feedback to recognise progress and to scaffold the next steps. For example:

- 'Great job correcting your work. Showing your working is making it easier to spot mistakes you might be making.'

- 'Well done. I can see you've described possible motivations for the main character's decision. Where could you strengthen your description with evidence from the text?'

When checking for understanding, provide feedback on mistakes in productive ways that open discussion or prompt action, such as:

- 'Many students struggle with this one. Let's look at a different example together and see whether it helps us figure out what went wrong here.'

- 'I understand why your first instinct was to use [incorrect strategy]. In this situation, though, we need to use [correct strategy] because …'

Seek and respond to feedback from students to gain insights into ways you can strengthen your teaching approach. This can be through checking in with students while circulating the classroom, or written responses on an exit ticket. Seeking feedback will demonstrate that you care what students think and it allows you to model ways to respond to feedback. Building positive relationships with students can help ensure honest and meaningful feedback.

Value and care for students

Teach, model and recognise respectful interactions

Explicitly teach rules and routines for expected behaviours, such as routines to seek assistance, ask questions or share information. Model respect, warmth, care, interest and empathy in your interactions to show students that you hold them in positive regard. Use regular routines and everyday interactions as opportunities to acknowledge and praise students for behaviours that build connection and belonging and facilitate learning success. Draw attention to how you'd like students to behave rather than things you don't want them to do. For example:

- 'Checking every answer when you have extra time is a great idea, Dani, and will help you every time.'

- 'During that exercise, I saw everyone participating and sharing examples for the task. Well done. Let's continue to encourage each other as we do the next activity.'

When responding to disengaged or disruptive behaviours, provide students with the opportunity to change their behaviour using clear communication and a calm, non-threatening tone. Start with less intrusive responses – for example, a non-verbal correction, such as a finger to the lips, combined with a look. Acknowledge students when they correct their behaviour.

AERO's Foundational Classroom Management Resources Handbook provides further advice about evidence-based classroom management practices.

Over time, regular routines, modelling and recognising respectful interactions influence the norms within your classroom that support everyone to feel included, respected, safe and supported. Remember that what may be the norm for some may be new to others. Students will need time to learn and multiple opportunities to practise before they can consistently meet expectations. For example, rather than reprimanding a student who consistently arrives without the correct uniform or learning materials, a mutually respectful response might be to privately enquire with care and curiosity about barriers the student may be experiencing to help find ways to overcome them.[24]

Build trust with credibility, care and consistency

Words, facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, eye contact and actions all help to build trust with your students. Trust forms gradually, and multiple interactions will be required before trust begins to form. You can earn and build trust by demonstrating 3 key qualities:

- **Credibility *(knowing what to teach and how to support learning)*:** Trust can be earned when you demonstrate knowledge and skill in leading student learning. This makes you credible. You can demonstrate your credibility as their teacher by showing students genuine intent to support their learning, consistently using effective teaching approaches, actively identifying and responding to student needs and following through when making commitments.

- **Care *(knowing students)*:** Trust can be earned through care when you seek to understand students and demonstrate that you're interested in and willing to advocate for them. Demonstrate care by getting to know your students and what's important to them. This includes getting to know your students on a cognitive level: know what they know, what they can do and help them progress from there.

Build relationships of trust and <u>learn about the context of your school</u>, students, their families and communities. Foster opportunities for sharing and actively listen to the ideas, feedback, concerns and aspirations students are willing to share with you.

- **Consistency *(following through and being fair)*:** You can demonstrate consistency by being reliable, fair, equitable and predictable in all aspects of your teaching and interactions. Demonstrate emotional stability so students know they can rely on you.[25] <u>Explicitly teach classroom routines</u>, and provide multiple opportunities to practise. Routines give students certainty about what's expected in the classroom by providing consistency, predictability and structure.[26]

Developing your practice*

Consider what's informing your current practices, expectations and beliefs. Use these questions to reflect, make a plan to develop your practice and seek feedback to monitor the impact for your students.

- How are the positive connections you've built with students supporting the creation of a safe and supportive learning environment?

- What is one thing you can improve to strengthen your relationships with students to further enhance their motivation and sense of belonging?

- How can you adjust your practices to ensure students feel connected and motivated in the learning environment?

- What would others (e.g., peers, students, leaders) observe about your approach to fostering positive relationships and belonging? How could you invite and use their feedback to strengthen your approach?

*Reflexive practice (reflexivity) is a process that critically examines personal attitudes, values and biases, with a view to becoming a more self-aware and effective teacher. Through reflexive practice, teachers, educators and school leaders can appraise and evaluate how their behaviours and ideas influence their teaching and learning.[27]

Further reading

Lovell, O. (Host). (2021, June 1). Peps Mccrea on motivating students (No. 54) [Audio podcast]. In *Education Research Reading Room*. https://www.ollielovell.com/pepsmccrea/

> In this podcast episode, Peps Mccrea and Ollie Lovell discuss how teachers can motivate students effectively. They also provide a list of books, websites and other resources teachers can draw on for more information.

Lemov, D. (2018). "It's the most important tool for building relationships," and other insights about Check for Understanding. *Teach Like a Champion*. https://teachlikeachampion.org/blog/important-tool-building-relationships-insights-check-understanding/

> This blog post discusses checking for understanding as a group of techniques for supporting building positive relationships with students. It includes videos of classroom practice, showing examples of checking for understanding techniques – such as 'tracking not watching' – in action.

AERO. (2024). *Building positive connections with all students*. https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/building-positive-connections-all-students

> AERO's classroom management practice guide provides practical suggestions for teachers to build positive connections with their students.

AERO. (2023). *Encouraging a sense of belonging and connectedness in secondary schools*. https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/encouraging-belonging-and-connectedness-secondary

AERO. (2023). *Encouraging a sense of belonging and connectedness in primary schools*. https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/encouraging-belonging-and-connectedness-primary

> AERO's practice guides draw on an evidence review to recommend practices that support students' connectedness to and sense of belonging in school environments. These include approaches that can be used at both the classroom and whole-school levels, as well as a list of next steps for schools.

Endnotes

1   Australian Education Research Organisation. (2023a). *Encouraging a sense of belonging and connectedness in secondary schools*. https://www.edresearch.edu.au/guides-resources/practice-guides/encouraging-belonging-and-connectedness-secondary

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13   Cobb, F., & Krownapple, J. (2019). *Belonging through a culture of dignity: The keys to successful equity implementation*. Mimi & Todd Press.

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