

# RELATIONSHIP BUILDING



## A Practical Start up Guide

by

**Nylinka School  
Solutions**



# INTRODUCTION

Relationships are the bedrock of human interaction and civilization. All human relationships are built on trust. We have seen slow but progressive shifts in education over the past several years that are moving toward fully humanizing students. We see restorative practices taking root in schools. We see character education programs, and more child-centered approaches to education that emphasize social emotional learning. Thinking of students as human beings is no longer a progressive education trend, but a philosophy that is embedding itself in the mainstream.

To that end, relationship building is a must for educators at all levels. Relationships are the lifeblood in building school culture. They are the bedrock of classroom and behavior management. We know that procedures, rules, routines matter to maintain order, predictability and safety. However, rules do not make students run through a brick wall and try their hardest. Relationships do. In the end, relationships not rules bolster engagement and positive behavior. They are the focal point of academic growth and excellence. The adages have existed for some time: Kids do not care how much you know, until they know how much you care. These adages are not only socially sound, but scientific. "Just one relationship can heal trauma, aid in brain development, and promote learning," says Megan Marcus of FuelEd.

# WHAT THE DATA SAYS

Having strong relationships fosters trust. This is critical because students who trust adults are more inclined to come to adults with problems. According to a March 2021 study by Edtrust, many students do not experience trusting and enduring relationships. A survey of 25,000 6-12 graders found that over one third of students felt they did not have strong relationships with the adults and teachers. That number was as low as 16% for twelfth graders. Strong relationships mean children behave better, get into less trouble, achieve more academically and get along better with peers. Brain science tells us that relationship building is important for students because of what happens neurologically. When teachers give praise to students, it releases dopamine. This makes students feel good and in turn makes them want to enter the cycle again. They therefore repeat the behavior in order to recreate the dopamine release. Because we are feeling, sentient beings, there are many physiological and biochemical benefits to positive and nourishing relationships.

*A few other data points to consider:*



**Students who feel connected to school are less likely to engage in risky behavior**



**Building positive relationships that foster a safe supportive environment and student connection is the responsibility of all adults and students**



**Caring adults play an important role in building strong relationships with students which facilitate their connection to school.**

Below are some strategies to develop stronger relationships with students. This list is not exhaustive, but when practiced in concert, these strategies yield great results both academically and socially.

# COMPONENTS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Take a Minute



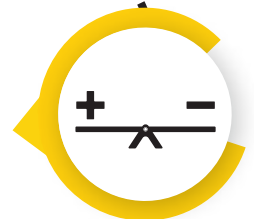
Avoid the Advice Monster



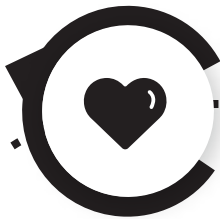
Empathetic Listening



Balancing Positive & Negative Interactions



Let Your Hair Down



Restorative Practices



Advisory



Home Visits



Relational Mapping



Communication with Families



Positive Adult Culture



# COMPONENTS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING



## Take a Minute

Talk to students. Get to know their story. Talking to students whenever you have the opportunity is a great place to start. Talk at the beginning of class. If you have a few minutes after and in between courses, talk. Share who you are as well. If you have a bad memory, write the finer points down. Ask them who they live with; getting to know family structure gives insight into children's homelife. Talking to boys about technology, and sports is always a good "in". Asking female students about their other relationships or shows they watch can be an "in". If those "ins" and shortcuts do not work, simply ask them what they are interested in. Teachers do not need to be the most popular teacher in the world, they just need to be genuinely interested and authentic.



## Empathetic Listening

Empathetic listening is the process of listening with an empathetic ear. It entails listening to learn and understand and as opposed to listening for the sake of responding. It allows listeners to feel what is being said emotionally as well as what is being said intellectually. Empathetic listeners sense what is being said and what is not being said. Empathetic listening signals there is genuine interest in the person and what is being conveyed. Our response as the listener is secondary to creating the emotional connectivity to continuing to listening. Empathetic listeners are considered more compassionate, understanding, patient and helpful. These are all recipes for relationship building and continued communication.



## Avoid the Advice Monster

At the microlevel, it is important that we listen to students. Part of this is asking more questions. When teachers ask more questions, they get more information and learn more. While listening more, they become sounding boards for children. Often children come to us, but they are not actively interested in advice; sometimes they need to vent and verbalize problems. Other times, they just want to know that adults care about them outside of their grades. They also want to know that we will listen and not stand in judgment. When children confide in us, we should avoid giving advice unless children ask. In *The Coaching Habit*, Michael Bungay Stanier calls this the **advice monster**. The advice monster creeps in and adults hog conversation discussing their experiences or what they would do if they were in the predicament. Giving unwanted advice upends the potential for a stronger relationship because adults are dictating and doing to children as opposed to empowering them to arrive at answers on their own. Advice has value, and in many situations, students want our advice and guidance. But we should always ask students if they want our advice. This is especially true at the high school level. Teachers should always use their professional discretion; Adults should not listen to a major problem and leave the child in limbo, but lead them to answers. If children do not have answers, then advice from teachers, or even a conversation with parents may be necessary.



# Balancing Positive and Negative Interactions

It is important that teachers have more positive interactions with children than negative ones. As teachers, you can't know the interactions between students and other teachers, so it is important to stay positive. This does not mean we do not correct or redirect students, however it is important to do it in a positive light. Teachers should be thinking about how to humanize students in all interactions, including when students are not doing the correct thing. The rule of thumb is ten positive interactions for every one negative one. If you know of other negative interactions, it is critical to correct it, even if it is initiated by the student. Keep in mind that some students suffer from trust issues and are resistant to relationship building. They do not trust adults, so letting things develop naturally is critical.

Other children carry A.C.E.s and traumatic experiences that make it difficult to build and maintain bonds. These children have traumatic experiences that make them weary of letting adults in. They can cause disruptions or become emotionally cold on adults because they consciously are unwilling to trust. They wall adults (and other children too) off in order to keep themselves emotionally and physically safe.



***It is important to have trauma-trained adults on staff to help break down barriers.***



Because teachers are feeling beings too, they can become reactionary and pathologize students. The goal is to separate the student from their response to trauma. We should pathologize the toxic behavior and not the child. This allows for more communication and bridge building. More can be said about A.C.E.s and children's responses to trauma. However, that is beyond the scope of this toolkit.

*If you need more resources, please contact us at [info@Nylinka.org](mailto:info@Nylinka.org).*



## Advisory

Advisory is a great time to check in with students. It breaks down traditional barriers and allows students and adults to connect. Some schools have been very creative with advisory periods, particularly after quarantining from COVID. Some schools have advisory more frequently. Others make advisory single gender or focused on identity-based groups like LGBTQ, to allow students the opportunity to bond with each other in meaningful ways. These identity-based groups may seem isolating or discriminatory on the surface, but they allow students to engage in conversations they might readily avoid in mixed group settings.

Advisory can also be used to review grades, behavioral concerns or even lead conversations about current events. There's lots of leeway, but Nylinka recommends listening to students. The entire goal is to lift and amplify student voice. Advisory is a perfect time to ask students what should happen during advisory time.





## Restorative Practices

One of the most comprehensive ways schools can show their beliefs in the power of relationships is to invest in restorative practices. Restorative practices will not work without a commitment to the individual. That commitment to the individual is to see them as human and build lasting and meaningful relationships. When schools use restorative practices, the goal is to repair the community to its original state. Restorative circles allow students and adults to come together and talk about the harm that has been done, and strategize ways to fix it as a community. It centers student voice and agency. Amplifying student voice is always a positive. Students appreciate collaborating with adults rather than adults doing things to them. For more information on restorative practices, please see Nylinka's Restorative Practice start up guide here: <https://nylinka.org>



### Let Your Hair Down

Teachers have to let their hair down. This makes sense intuitively, but at a building-wide level there have to be days that allow teachers to look and feel like full human beings. Students going on field trips is a great way to engage in conversation and relationships building. Adults tend to sit with adults and socialize among themselves on trips, but the opposite is necessary. Teachers should be sitting with students and talking. Conversations with students in informal and non-academic settings go a long way.



### Home Visits

One of the most efficient and visceral ways to get to connect with children and families is home visits. They should be mandatory for all new families. This is a heavy ask, but it is well worth the time and effort. Imagine how mutual respect and belonging are created when a classroom teacher visits all of her students over the course of a year. Principals and special teachers can engage visits too. With the advent of video conferencing we have had students give tours of their homes, because it can be cumbersome for a teacher to visit 20-25 homes. Parents, particularly in Black and Latinx communities can be weary of showing the inside of their homes, and that level of vulnerability. Communicating the why is important to make parents feel relaxed and comfortable. Some will still have reservations, and that is ok, as no one strategy is the silver bullet. Using strategies in concert yields high results even when families are resistant to any one strategy.



## Communication with Families

The best schools over communicate with parents. In a world gone mad with apps for attendance, student pick up and drop off, class dojo, grading and the like, how often are teachers picking up the phone to call home? This is not only a necessity in elementary schools, but also in middle and high schools. In *The Burning House: Educating Black Boys in Modern America*, Nylinka president, discusses parents teaching their sons to forge relationships with adults. This is critical in high school because adults do not spend as much time with students as they do in elementary models. However, later in the text, Williams urges teachers to forge those relationships with students.



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*Do not underestimate the power of phone calls*

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Speaking of calls, do not underestimate the power of phone calls as opposed to emails and tech-based communication. Technology allows us multiple chances to avoid human interaction. This has a place once norms have been established, but the power of the human voice cannot be replaced, particularly when establishing positive relationships with families. This is tougher on middle and high school teachers as they may have 180 students, as opposed to 25 students at the elementary level. So technology can be an equalizer for the sheer volume of communications that needs to happen. Our best advice is to think about 15 minutes of calls Monday-Thursday. How many calls can you make during that time to update parents on student social progress? Once the groundwork has been established, communication with parents becomes easier and less time consuming. Once parents know teachers care, the emails seem less impersonal and parents take on the role of partner as opposed to passive participant.



## Relational Mapping

Nylinka School Solutions recommends all schools undergo relational mapping. Relational mapping creates a visual of adults/student relationships. This can be done at the elementary level, but should be mandatory in middle and high schools because of the number of adults students interface with. Middle and high school students are faced with so many more challenges than they did 15 or even 5 years ago. Bullying, social media, the pandemic, a shrinking world, the adultification of girls, cyberbullying are all harsh realities for teens. It can lead to isolation and withdrawal. Relational mapping entails having each student's name placed on a grid or spreadsheet. Adults then place color-coded stickers next to the child's name if they have a relationship with the students. Teachers can use green, yellow or red stickers to denote the level of connectivity with students. This visual helps adults see which children



need more meaningful relationships, and who is potentially at risk for disenfranchisement. We recommend middle and high schools start the mapping in early October. Special attention should be given to newer students and incoming first-year students. However, as middle and high schools undergo this annually, schools should notice more and stronger relationships with upperclassmen and returning students. The map allows game planning for students who do not have quality relationships. Adults can discuss mitigating factors, and how to combat them. We encourage all adults to be a part of the mapping process, including administrators, custodians, and special teachers. After schools collect this visual data, it should be archived and compared to future mappings.

At the elementary level, mapping is also critical. The assumption is classroom teachers have the most meaningful relationship with their students. This is not always true. So what is to be done with students who do not have the strongest relationship with their classroom teacher? These conversations happen naturally in mapping meetings. These mapping sessions are proactive and allow teachers to look at data and have relational conversations before behavior problems occur.

Relational mapping is a visual breakdown of relationships in school. Research tells us that the more connected students are to a community, the more belonging they feel. They are more prone to go to adults with problems and issues and they have higher academic achievement. As one Nylinka client put it, "It functions like a heat map. Staff know where the trouble spots are. We know the places we need to check in daily. (We) have an action plan for students who are more disconnected. Those are our priorities in terms of social emotional support, but it is a different conversation than if we were looking at behavioral data or suspensions." The tone of the conversation is different because relational mapping examines who may be falling through the cracks. Students who do not have existing or stable relationships with staff might be reserved or quiet. They may not be perceived as behavior problems. However, they need as much attention as those who cry for attention through negative behavior.

### Relational Mapping Example

#	Student	Strong Relations	Positive Relationship	No Relationship
1	Derek Powers	Perkins, Lowry, Addison, Klatt	Calloway	Gathers, Smith Sanders
2	Liza Players	Gathers, Lowry	Klatt	Perkins, Perkins
3	Vickie Roberts	Calloway	Gathers, Lowry, Sanders	Klatt, Sanders
4	Blair Thomas	-	Lowry	Multiple

In reviewing the relationship map categories, strong relationships are just that, strong. The teacher and students have intact, lasting and trusting bonds. The "positive relationship" column is for staff who are pleasant and get along with the student, but not necessarily someone a student would confide in. "No relationship" means there is little to no interaction between the adult and student. Based on the examples given, Derek Powers has strong relationships with staff. Blair Thomas on the other hand, should be a point of focus. Maybe Blair is new, but regardless he has to be the focal point. The mapping allows for conversation and the conversation allows for action, as it is ultimately a scoreboard that monitors staff progress in relationship building and maintenance.



## Positive Adult Culture

Culture trumps everything! Teachers cannot have amazing and healthy relationships with students and be unhealthy with each other. Adults must communicate well, even if they do not see eye to eye. Schools are political places with hierarchy, power dynamics and embedded cultures. The more healthy the culture is for adults, the healthier it is for students. If new and struggling teachers are supported, chances are the same is true for new students. Mistreatment is a disease. If adults allow for other adults to be mistreated, ignored, or unsupported, there is a good chance that it is ok for students to be mistreated, ignored and unsupported. Some adults scoff at team building activities, but they allow adults to see each other in a different light. Mrs. Johnson becomes more than the teacher across the hall. She becomes a living being that may need the support of a colleague or just a “hello” or hug in the morning. What is the adult culture in your building? How do teachers show appreciation for each other? How does administration celebrate small steps, and large gains?

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*The more healthy the culture is for adults,  
the healthier it is for students*

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## A Final Word

Embracing children as complete human beings is the wave of the future in education. Part of that wave is building meaningful and lasting relationships with them. None of the strategies above are meant to be implemented alone. The goal is to use them in concert. As a great teacher once lamented,

**“ Students do not remember what you taught them, but they do remember how we made them feel. ”**



Please visit

[www.Nylinka.org](http://www.Nylinka.org) | [info@Nylinka.org](mailto:info@Nylinka.org)



**202-258-3349**

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