

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark blue graduation cap and gown, is smiling broadly and hugging another person whose face is not visible. The background shows other graduates in similar attire at a graduation ceremony.

**CULTIVATING CARING
RELATIONSHIPS
WITH STUDENTS**

Jostens[®]

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“The perception that teachers care about their students is among the strongest predictors of student performance.”

- Carol Dweck and colleagues 2011

The actions demonstrated by the teacher may vary for each student, but an underlying espoused belief exists that each student needs to be cared for in ways that make sense to him or her rather than in ways that are the same for every student.

Though it may have become a cliché, it remains true: Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. In the bustle and chaos of starting a new school year, it can be easy to forget the importance of connecting with students personally, making sure they know you care.

Caring creates a connection of mutual interest, warmth, trust and respect. These qualities become the foundation for deepening and maintaining the relationship, even when dealing with tough issues and challenges in the classroom.

The ways teachers express care will vary among students. But each approach is responsive to who each student is and what each student needs. It grows out a commitment for each student to experience the acceptance, respect, trust and sense of belonging they need to learn and thrive.

Sometimes it's hard to make caring a priority amid the papers to grade, course material to cover, and the other demands of teaching. Some students may act in ways that makes it hard to respect, accept and trust them. However, when educators find ways — even small ways — to express care and connect with students in ways that matter to the student, not only do motivation and learning increase, but both teachers and students enjoy their time together.

Relationships between teachers and students have many dimensions, as suggested by Search Institute's [Developmental Relationships Framework](#). The starting point for high-quality teacher-student relationships is caring.

Source:

Dweck, C. S., Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2011). *Academic tenacity: Mindset and skills that promote long-term learning*. Seattle, WA: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Expressing care is the foundation of teacher-student relationships. A range of research shows that caring between teachers and students have a lasting impact on many educational and behavioral outcomes throughout a student's formal education. Yet students' experiences of caring in teacher-student relationships declines through middle school and high school.

The Power of Caring in Teacher-Student Relationships

When students experience more care and emotional support from their teachers, they are more likely to...

- + Take more initiative and responsibility for their own learning.
- + Pay more attention and exert more effort in class.
- + Do better in school, based on grades and test scores.
- + Ask for help when they need it.
- + Have lower levels of anxiety.
- + Have more positive relationships with peers and classmates.
- + Have parents who get more involved in school activities.

It's important to note that care, by itself, is not enough. In addition to the emotional support of caring, teachers also need to provide practice help (or "instrument" support) to help them develop skills to achieve their goals. Students can interpret a lack of practical help as a sign that their teacher has low expectations of them, which undermines their school performance.

Sources:

Cornelius-White, J. (2007). Learner-centered teacher-student relationships are effective: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 113–143. <http://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298563>

Dearing, E., Kreider, H. M., & Weiss, H. B. (2008). Increased family involvement in school predicts improved child-teacher relationships and feelings about school for low-income children. *Marriage & Family Review*, 43(3–4), 226–254. <http://doi.org/10.1080/01494920802072462>

Federici, R. A., & Skaalvik, E. M. (2014). Students' perceptions of emotional and instrumental teacher support: Relations with motivational and emotional responses. *International Education Studies*, 7(1), 21–36. <http://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v7n1p21>

Gehlbach, H., Brinkworth, M. E., & Harris, A. D. (2012). Changes in teacher-student relationships. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 82(4), 690–704. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.2011.02058>

Ruzek, E. A., Hafen, C. A., Allen, J. P., Gregory, A., Mikami, A. Y., & Pianta, R. C. (2016). How teacher emotional support motivates students: The mediating roles of perceived peer relatedness, autonomy support, and competence. *Learning and Instruction*, 42, 95–103.

The Positive Effects of Caring Teacher-Student Relationships Linger

The effects of caring relationships between teachers and students extend beyond the end of a school year. In fact, the care students experience can affect their behaviors up to four years later. A study of 1,067 students in Switzerland found that having strong relationships with teachers when students are ages 10 and 11 is associated with reduced problem classroom behaviors up to four years later. In fact, students who reported positive relationships with their teachers early in middle school were much less likely to argue and feel vindictive toward teachers and other authority figures four years later in high school.

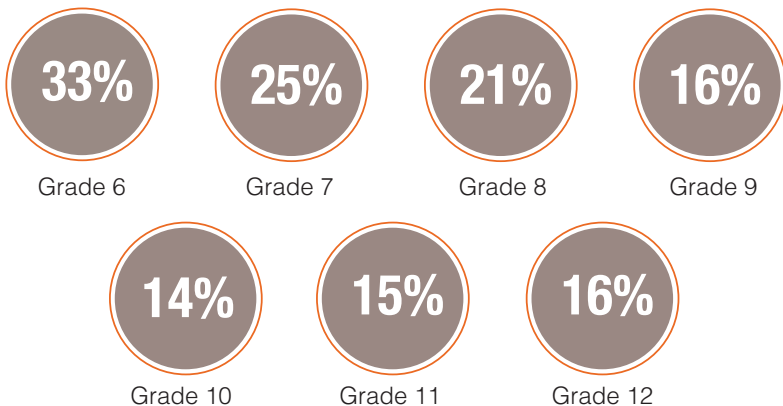
SOURCE:

Obsuth, I., Murray, A. L., Malti, T., Sulger, P., Ribeaud, D., & Eisner, M. (2016). A non-bipartite propensity score analysis of the effects of teacher-student relationships on adolescent problem and prosocial behavior. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 1-27.

Students Perceive Decline in Teacher Caring Through Middle School

As students grow up, they increasingly look to adults beyond their families as sources of support, guidance and encouragement. (It's part of internalizing their own identity distinct from their parents.) However, across these years, teacher-student relationships tend to become less common and less positive.

Search Institute surveys of more than 120,000 students in grades 6 to 12 found only 18% of middle and high school students strongly agree that their teachers really care about them. The proportion of students who believe teachers really care drops by half through the middle school years — from 33% in sixth grade to 16% in ninth grade.



SOURCE:

Unpublished results from Search Institute surveys of 121,157 students in grades 6 to 12 across the United States. Surveys were completed between Fall 2012 and Spring 2015.

Teacher-Student Relationships Across Lines of Race and Culture

A sensitive, but important, issue in education today is how best to address inequities or gaps in education between different racial and ethnic groups of students. Much attention has been paid to culturally responsive teaching practices that can help to challenge stereotypes and address these gaps for students of color. In addition, researchers have begun examining the critical role that caring relationships between teachers and students can help to counterbalance stereotypes that undermine students' experiences of care. Some intentional ways educators have built caring, trusting relationships with students across lines of race and culture to build mutual respect and understanding include the following:

- Validate students' cultural heritage as a source of strength and a resource for learning, which cultivates respect and reinforces that students are valued for who they are. This includes structuring conversations and lessons that tap the skills and experiences that students bring from their families, cultures and backgrounds for deepening relationships and learning.
- Show personal interest in them, the things they care about and their life experiences.
- Be clear and consistent in holding high expectations for all students, thus challenging stereotypes that tend to reinforce lower expectations of some groups of students.
- Emphasize learning as a social process in which the class works together and supports each other. This includes making it a priority to include everyone and believing that the class as a whole can be successful in learning.
- Work to minimize the separation between the teacher and students by participating actively in the classroom community. This may include self-disclosure, humor and playfulness, and acknowledging mistakes, all of which can deepen mutual care and connections.



SOURCES:

Bates, L. A., & Glick, J. E. (2013). Does it matter if teachers and schools match the student? Racial and ethnic disparities in problem behaviors. *Social Science Research, 42*(5), 1180–1190. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2013.04.005>

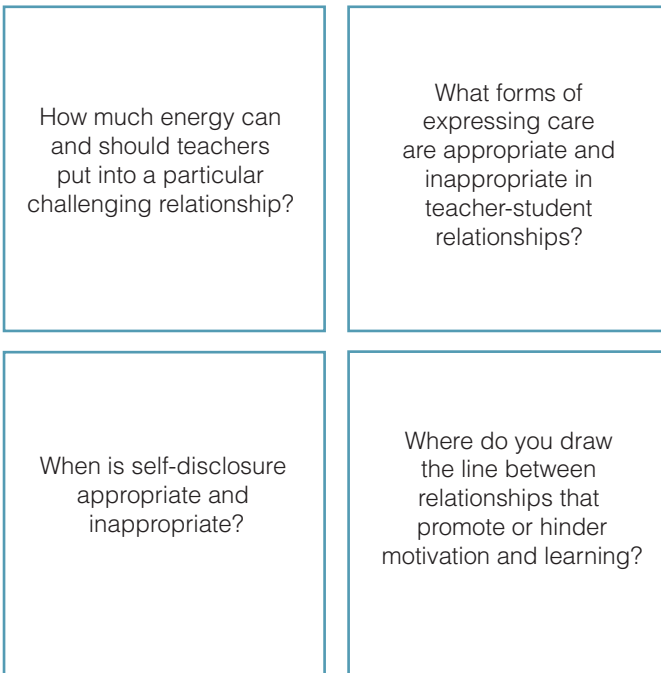
Cholewa, B., Amatea, E. S., West-Olatunji, C. A., & Wright, A. (2012). Examining the relational processes of a highly successful teacher of African American children. *Urban Education, 47*(1), 250–279. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0042085911429581>

Garza, R. (2009). Latino and white high school students' perceptions of caring behaviors: Are we culturally responsive to our students? *Urban Education, 44*(3), 297–321. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0042085908318714>

It Goes Both Ways: Reciprocity and Boundaries in Caring

Discussions of teacher-student relationships often focus only on teachers' roles and responsibilities. However, each relationship is a two-way street; by their nature, relationships are reciprocal and bidirectional. Thus, teachers and students each play roles in how their relationship works — or doesn't work. Those dynamics often shift and have to be negotiated and renegotiated, sometimes daily. That process can bring both great satisfaction and ongoing conflict and tension.

Critical questions about boundaries also surface as teachers seek to express care. These include:



These and other dilemmas about expressing care in teacher-student relationships are not easily answered, but they are an important part of the dynamic. Struggling through them with colleagues increases teachers' abilities to maintain ethical, caring relationships with students.

SOURCE:

Aultman, L. P., Williams-Johnson, M. R., & Schutz, P. A. (2009). Boundary dilemmas in teacher–student relationships: Struggling with “the line.” *Teaching and Teacher Education, 25*(5), 636-646.

TIP SHEET

Expressing Care in Relationships with Students

Care is the foundation of strong teacher-student relationships. It is also a two-way street. When a sense of care is shared in the classroom and school, not only will students be more motivated, but also everyone will enjoy being and learning together. These ideas highlight how you can express care with your students, based on Search Institute's Framework of Developmental Relationships. They also offer ways to encourage students to express care in the classroom.

General Actions	How Teachers Can Express Care with Students	How Teachers Can Encourage Students to Express Care
<p>Be warm</p> <p>Show me you enjoy being with me.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interact often with students, even if it's only briefly. It lets them know you notice them.• Use students' names correctly as soon and as consistently as possible during the school year. It tells students they are important to you.• Regularly laugh and have fun together in the classroom. The fun can come in ways you break the ice or keep the learning environment welcoming and relaxed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Share stories and insights about yourself with students, just as you're hoping they will share information about themselves that will make it easier to relate to them.• If students seem to be emotionally withdrawn one day, check in with them without embarrassing or ridiculing them. This may be as simple as saying privately: "I noticed that you seemed distracted today. Is everything okay?"
<p>Be dependable</p> <p>Be someone I can trust.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Keep your commitments and promises. (When you can't, apologize.)• Some students will have their guard up. Building trust requires clear, consistent and sustained signals of acceptance and respect. Give it time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Let them know that you expect to be able to trust them.• When students let you or each other down or don't follow through on their commitments, hold them accountable without shaming them.
<p>Listen to each other</p> <p>Really pay attention when we are together</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When talking with students, set aside technology and distractions. Get at their eye level, and ask clarifying questions.• Listen actively and attentively when students share personal information. Ask open-ended questions, and refrain from changing the topic.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thank students when they express care to you by listening, being warm and friendly, and being dependable.• Set classroom expectations about paying attention to each other, listening well and interrupting each other.

General Actions	How Teachers Can Express Care with Students	How Teachers Can Encourage Students to Express Care
<p>Believe in me Make me feel known and valued.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tap the students' skills, back grounds, interests, expertise, and experiences as resources for learning and community building. • Jot notes to remind you to follow up after students tell you something they are doing or dealing with that is important to them. Then check in later to see how it's going. • Recognize progress of both individual students and the class as a whole. Honor specific ways the class is learning and becoming more supportive to each other. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When students notice something you or a classmate do that they appreciate, thank them for their acknowledgment. (Don't dismiss it or minimize it.) Make it safe and normal to say encouraging, positive things to each other. • Tell students things about yourself and your background that help them get to know you and value the experiences you bring to the classroom and subject matter.
<p>Encourage Praise for my efforts and achievements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notice and celebrate specific ways students contribute to the class or make progress with learning. • Encourage students in ways that fit their personalities. Some may really appreciate public affirmation. Others may prefer private feedback. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask students for feedback — not because you're "needy," but because it's important to model giving and receiving feedback, whether positive or negative. • Give students opportunities to give positive feedback to each other. Help them practice being sincere and specific in the feedback they give.

SOURCES:

Cholewa, B., Amatea, E. S., West-Olatunji, C. A., & Wright, A. (2012). Examining the relational processes of a highly successful teacher of African American children. *Urban Education, 47*(1), 250–279. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0042085911429581>

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Murray, C., & Zvoch, K. (2011). The Inventory of Teacher-Student Relationships: Factor structure, reliability, and validity among African American youth in low-income urban schools. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 31*(4), 493–525. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0272431610366250>

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: MY “BACKSTORY”

In literature, a “backstory” is a device to recount the events from the past that led up to the primary story of interest in the plot. It gives context to the main focus, often making it more meaningful and significant. TV reality shows, sports broadcasts, and other entertainment and news sources also use this technique by retelling the challenges and events from the past that shaped who a person is today. In some senses, the backstory helps to answer the questions: “What makes you tick? How did you become who you are now?”

This writing assignment—which could be used in a language arts class or other settings—encourages students to think of and write about their own backstory. In doing so, students often learn new things about themselves, and you also gain insight into who they are and what is important to them.

Step 1

Explain the idea of “backstory” to students. Note that the backstory recounts events from the past that, in retrospect, were key experiences that led up to why someone is where they are today. For example, a star athlete’s backstory might focus on where they grew up, when they really got interested in their sport, who influenced and mentored them, challenges they overcome, and similar facts. (If you wish, show an example from the web or from literature that illustrates a backstory.)

Step 2

Ask students to think about something that is an important part of who they are today—how they think of themselves. It might be an activity, interest, or ability that’s really important to them. It might be a personal quality or value that really matters to them.

Step 3

Once they have identified this “lead story,” assign them to write their own backstory of what has happened in their past that contributed to this part of who they are today. Have them include specific examples of things they did, when they did them, who helped them, what challenges they overcame and other details that help to explain how they got to where they are today.

Variations: If students prefer and if it fits your classroom goals, consider inviting students to present their backstory in formats other than writing. This could include making a video, creating a collage, doing a skit or making a presentation.

Step 4

Collect the assignments (or have students present them). Thank students for sharing important information about themselves. Provide specific feedback that affirms their story and shows interest in their experiences. Avoid dismissing or minimizing their experiences. Instead, ask follow-up questions that help them reflect more deeply and that highlight connections you might have to their own story.

Step 5

Depending on your class dynamics and goals, consider whether to have students share their stories with each other. If you decide to share stories, be sure to say that you’ll do so when you make the assignment and seek the student’s permission (in private) before doing so. Set clear ground rules about the kind of feedback students offer each other.

Step 6

Keep a few notes on each student’s background. Be intentional about connecting with them by asking a follow-up question or inviting them to share their experiences with the class when it fits the curriculum. Their experiences, history and expertise then become a resource for learning — and building deeper connections.