



The importance of the teacher: student relationship

INFORMATION FOR PAERENTS, CARERS AND TEACHERS

June 2015

by Joseph Degeling, Psychologist

As a school psychologist, I am always quite conscious when talking with teachers of the fact that I am not a teacher, and do not have the day-to-day experience of being in front of a room full of 30 children or adolescents, each with their own motives and attitudes to learning. I am also aware that whenever I talk about the teacher-student relationship, quite a few of my educational colleagues grumble "not this old chestnut again", as well as thinking "this is not a strategy I can use in the classroom"! But I believe it is *the most effective classroom management strategy*, and one which maximises student learning and wellbeing whilst also decreasing teacher and student stress.

Classroom learning can only occur *through* the medium of a teacher-student relationship. We know that positive relationships are good for us – they mitigate the effects of stress, enable feelings of connectedness, make us feel good about ourselves, enable communication, promote mental *health* and so on. Physiologically, when we feel safe and secure in a relationship/environment our bodies produce less stress hormones which means that we are more able to concentrate and form memories: that is, learn (stress hormones decrease our ability to learn, form memories, and concentrate on complex cognitive tasks and so on). We also know that good teacher-student relationships are a fundamental aspect of the promotion of student wellbeing within schools.

So this all makes sense of course – but how can teachers use this knowledge to help them in the classroom? Here are some tips:

1. Regularly reflect on and be mindful of the quality of relationships you have with your students: talk with senior colleagues about how to develop better working relationships with those difficult students;
2. When entering a classroom try to look interested and happy to be there and express some interest in your students. Start with a joke, a funny picture or something humorous to lighten the mood;
3. Have a "fresh start" approach to each lesson - no expectations about who the naughty kids are going to be, or what they are going to do!
4. Think about the top 3-4 difficult kids in your class – make a concerted effort to have some positive connection with them: ask them about their weekend, find some point of common interest, simply smile and say hello to them;
5. Your own stress can have a big part to play in your relationships with your students – when stress goes up, relationships become more vulnerable. Take steps to manage your own feelings – exercise, get a good night's sleep, eat well, make sure you're doing things you enjoy;
6. Try not to engage in power struggles with your students – they will certainly try to bait you. Instead roll with the resistance, and direct them back on track;
7. Persist with the above strategies – relationships won't change in a single lesson!