

4 Ways to Foster Positive Student Relationships

Middle school can be a socially awkward time for students, but these activities can help them feel more at ease with their peers.

[Ashley Ingle](#) September 25, 2019

Social and Emotional Learning

James Steinberg / The iSpot

Middle school can be a tough experience, socially. As many of us can recall, it's a time when students are figuring out how to express themselves individually even as they're trying hard to fit in with others. While it's important for teachers to build a rapport with their students, it can be just as valuable for students to become comfortable with one another—when students feel at ease with one another, it can lead to increased classroom engagement and academic success.

These are strategies I use to help students become more familiar and comfortable with each other.

1. Two-Minute Talks

Hand out a few slips of paper to each student and ask them write down questions they'd like to discuss as a group. These can be prompts like "Which restaurant serves the best pizza in town?" or "Would you rather _____ or _____?"

Once you have the questions, you can set aside two minutes at the

beginning or end of class—depending on your other classroom routines—for student-led discussions twice a week. Arrange a schedule that allows for each kid to have a chance to lead the talk. Put the schedule on the whiteboard and encourage the class to take ownership of this activity by having the students design a set of discussion norms.

On the designated days, all you need to do is hand a prompt to the facilitator. After that, stand to the side and listen to the conversations, but don't participate—this is a chance for students to chat about a non-academic topic of interest.

Introverts may be anxious about leading a discussion; you can ease this worry by allowing students to co-lead with a peer. To encourage self-advocacy, you can ask them to arrange this you before their turn to lead comes.

2. Class Playlist

Have students get out of their seats and write their favorite music artists or song titles on the whiteboard, using the recommendations to make a playlist for their class period. The brainstorming session often starts conversations between kids as they share their tastes and suggest more music for others to listen to. Alternately, you could do the brainstorming activity as an exit ticket and have students discuss their music choices the next day in small groups before coming together as a class.

It's also a fun bonding activity for the group to create and name the playlist together—it can be assembled using apps like Spotify Premium, Amazon Music, or YouTube. Throughout the year, the students can continue to add songs to their collection.

When you play the music—during a writing period, for example—you may want to keep the volume low and have noise-canceling headphones available or designate a corner away from the speaker for students who

prefer to work quietly.

3. Mix and Mingle

Once a week, tell your students to stand up and find a person to get to know better. To help them find a partner, you can give them prompts like, "Find someone wearing the same style of shoe as you." After everyone has a partner, give them multiple conversation starters like "What did you do this weekend?" or "What do you like to do in your free time?"

Having multiple prompts should alleviate awkward silences. You can write the prompts on the board or make cards that kids can carry around with them. Set an alarm or a timer, have them talk with their partner for a minute or two, and then throw out another find-a-partner prompt and repeat the process. This activity can give two kids who might never talk to one another an opportunity to find out they have a lot in common.

4. Gab and Go

Have students split into two groups, grabbing their chairs and making two long lines that face each other. Then throw out a question to the room. It can be academic or conversational, like "What's the last show you binged?" or "What song do you have on repeat these days?" Have the students talk with the person directly in front of them for 30 seconds to a minute, and encourage them to contribute to the discussion equally. When the time is up, have them shake hands, high-five, fist-bump, or give each other a thumbs-up.

Then have everyone in one of the lines scoot down one seat, with the person at the end of the line moving to the other end. Now that each student is face-to-face with a different peer, toss out another question and repeat the process.

The short time span of this activity will hopefully ease any concerns

introverts might have about chatting with their peers—the interactions move quickly, and they don't have to come up with topics for conversation.

There's a lot of pressure to teach bell-to-bell, but it's important to take some time to let students get to know each other and talk about stuff that isn't academic. You may even be providing opportunities for kids to form friendships that make their middle school years a time to remember fondly.

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A Framework for Student Goal-Setting

When middle and high school students set short- and long-term goals, they can see a path to the success they hope for.

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"If we did all the things we are capable of, we would literally astound ourselves."

—Thomas Edison

I learned that quote from Wendy Beth Rosen's *Self-Smart*. Taking it seriously, Wendy suggests some areas where students'—and adults'—self-assessments can lead to greater accomplishments and personal satisfaction. Many distractions and challenges in our lives threaten to throw us off our path, or keep us from knowing what our path is. Setting explicit goals for success and tracking our progress toward them is a way to increase our chances of finding the success we hope for.

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