

# Teacher empathy reduces student suspensions, Stanford research shows

When teachers think empathically, and not punitively, about misbehaving students, they cultivate better relationships and help reduce discipline problems, Stanford research shows.

By Clifton B. Parker April 26, 2016

Being suspended from school is typically harmful to students – it denies them opportunities to learn, damages relationships and sets them on a risky path.



Teachers who carry an empathic mindset toward students are shown in a Stanford study to deal better with youngsters who misbehave.

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In new Stanford research, an exercise that encouraged middle school teachers to take an “empathic mindset” to student discipline reduced by half the percentage of students who got suspended over the school year – from 9.6

percent to 4.8 percent.

The researchers included Stanford psychology post-doctoral fellow [Jason Okonofua](#), lead author on the paper, psychology researcher [David Paunesku](#), and [Gregory Walton](#), an associate professor of psychology at Stanford. The [study](#) was recently published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

As Okonofua and Walton wrote, a central tenet of the teaching profession is to build positive relationships with students, especially struggling students. But some teachers are exposed to a “default punitive mindset” in school settings due to zero-tolerance policies on student misbehavior.

“It is heartbreaking,” Walton said. “Teachers are caught between two models, a punitive model that says you have to punish kids to get them to behave and an older model that goes to the heart of the profession, which says that teaching is all about building strong relationships with children, especially when they struggle.”

He noted that no one enters the teaching profession in order to send kids to the principal’s office for minor misbehavior. “But punitive policies can lead teachers astray,” Walton said. “That makes kids feel disrespected and ultimately contributes to worse behavior.”

Okonofua added, “All kids need supportive, trusting relationships to help them grow and improve. Our intervention helped teachers reconnect with those values, who they really want to be as a teacher and how they want to relate to their students.”

## **Punishment or understanding?**

The researchers conducted three experiments. The first tested whether 39 teachers could be encouraged to adopt an empathic rather than punitive mindset about discipline. Teachers wrote briefly about how “good teacher-

student relationships are critical for students to learn self-control” (empathic mindset) or how “punishment is critical for teachers to take control of the classroom” (punitive mindset).

The findings showed that giving teachers an opportunity to express their empathic values – to understand students’ perspectives and to sustain positive relationships with students when they misbehave – improved student-teacher relationships and discipline outcomes.

In fact, teachers given the punitive prime said they would punish a hypothetical misbehaving student more harshly. They were more likely to send the student to the principal’s office. But those given the empathic prime were more likely to say they would talk with the student about his behavior, and less likely to label him a troublemaker.

“A focus on relationships helps humanize students.” Okonofua said. “Then you see them as not just a label but as growing people who can change, who can learn to behave more appropriately, with help.”

In the second experiment, 302 college students imagined themselves as middle school students who had disrupted class. They imagined being disciplined in either of the ways the teachers in the first experiment described, punitive or empathic.

The results showed that participants responded far more favorably when the teacher took an empathic response. They said they would respect the teacher much more, and would be more motivated to behave well in class in the future.

## **Improving relationships**

The researchers also examined whether an empathic mindset created better relationships between teachers and students and reduced student suspensions over an academic year. This experiment involved 31 math

teachers and 1,682 students at five ethnically diverse middle schools in three California school districts.

Teachers reviewed articles and stories that described how negative feelings can lead students to misbehave in school and emphasized the importance of understanding students and maintaining positive relationships with students even when they misbehave.

Then teachers described how they maintain positive relationships with students when they misbehave, in an effort to help future teachers better handle discipline problems.

The findings revealed that students whose teachers completed the empathic mindset exercise – as compared to those who completed a control exercise – were half as likely to get suspended over the school year, from 9.6 percent to 4.8 percent.

The reduction was just as large for students from groups at higher risk of suspension, including boys, African American and Latino students, and students with a history of suspension.

Moreover, the most at-risk students, those with a history of suspension, reported feeling more respected by their teachers several months after the intervention.

“This intervention, an online exercise, can be delivered at near-zero marginal cost to large samples of teachers and students. These findings could mark a paradigm shift in society’s understanding of the origins of and remedies for discipline problems,” the researchers wrote.

Walton noted how teachers responded when asked to write about how they work to sustain positive relationships with struggling children. One teacher wrote: “I never hold grudges. I try to remember that they are all the son or daughter of someone who loves them more than anything in the world. They

are the light of someone's life.”

Okonofua believes the research may spark a new frontier for psychological intervention in many different fields beyond teaching.

“There are cases in which one person's mindset can have a disproportionate impact on others – like doctors with patients, supervisors with employees, and police with civilians,” he said.