



Strategies

A Journal for Physical and Sport Educators

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ustr20>

Developing Positive Relationships: Strategies for Building Strong Teacher/Student Relationships

Gabrielle Bennett, Zachary Wahl-Alexander, & Jenn M. Jacobs

To cite this article: Gabrielle Bennett, Zachary Wahl-Alexander, & Jenn M. Jacobs (2023) Developing Positive Relationships: Strategies for Building Strong Teacher/Student Relationships, *Strategies*, 36:4, 22-26, DOI: [10.1080/08924562.2023.2221710](https://doi.org/10.1080/08924562.2023.2221710)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08924562.2023.2221710>



Published online: 09 Aug 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 411



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



© iStockphoto/South_agency

Developing Positive Relationships:

Strategies for Building Strong Teacher/Student Relationships

By Gabrielle Bennett, Zachary Wahl-Alexander, and Jenn M. Jacobs

In any education context (e.g., school, before/after school program, athletics, camp) instructors play a critical role in the developmental trajectory of a child. Instructor–child relationships can serve as an important determinant for the quality of psychosocial, academic and behavioral adjustments that transpire (Mason et al., 2017). For example, a supportive and positive instructor–adolescent relationship can aid in fostering a positive, safe and supportive atmosphere. In the academic setting, positive relationships have demonstrated significant associations with social functioning (empathy and warmth), academic achievement (higher-order thinking), and engagement (Graziano et al., 2007; Valiente et al., 2008). Contrarily, children that have poor relationships with their instructor reported lower academic performance and higher levels of insecurity, distress and aggressive behavior (Pianta, 1999).

There are multiple theories that help conceptualize how instructor–student relationships are forged (Martin & Dowson, 2009). One of the most widely recognized is attachment theory. The guiding principle of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) is that a positive relationship between parent and child promotes feelings of security and emotional regulation. A child with a secure attachment will develop an ‘internal working model’ or basis for how healthy future relationships should occur (Bowlby, 1969). Instructors in physical education and other sporting contexts can play an important role in this process to help youth form practices for successful social relationships with others. The attachment theory perspective has been extended (i.e., extended attachment theory) to better understand how instructor–student relationships are formed (Ang et al., 2020). Research posits that an instructor is oftentimes regarded as an ‘ad hoc attachment figure’ from preschool until adolescence (Verschuere & Koomen, 2012). Children who have positive relationships with their instructors use this as a secure base to more appropriately explore the classroom, because they feel safe enough to do so. Subsequently, youth are more eager to encounter challenging situations, learn socially acceptable behaviors, and develop socioemotional skills. Close and supportive relationships with instructors help serve as a buffer from distress, allowing children to focus their attention on engagement, social growth, and interactions with others within a learning environment (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). On the contrary, a negative student–instructor relationship indicates an absence of security and can obstruct a child’s attempt to manage various demands in school (Roorda et al., 2011). Although the extended attachment theory literature stems from within the classroom, these same guiding principles can be easily transferred into the relationships with youth leaders and children with whom they work in a variety of other settings (e.g., school, before/after school program, athletics, camp).

As the benefits of cultivating positive instructor–child relationships are clear, understanding what factors impact relationship quality is vital to cultivate future bonds within any context. Closeness and conflict are widely considered the two most common dimensions of any instructor–student relationship (Mason et al., 2017). *Closeness* represents the degree of support, affection and openness a child feels toward an instructor. *Conflict* reflects the degree to which a relationship is negative,

inharmonious and unpleasant, leading to a lack of support. Normally, conflict is considered the most distinctive feature in negative relationships, whereas closeness is a common attribute within a positive instructor–student relationship.

In education, it is generally understood that building positive relationships with students is an integral portion of an educator’s success and that increasing positive qualities and reducing negative qualities can aid in fostering meaningful relationships. However, there is a lack of discussion concentrated on tangible strategies that can be employed to help increase closeness or decrease conflict. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to outline several techniques for youth leaders to employ to help promote positive qualities (e.g., closeness), and reduce negative qualities (e.g., conflict) when interacting with youth. It is also important to note that these same approaches can be utilized in a wide range of contexts (e.g., before/after school programs, YMCA, camps, youth detention centers), by youth leaders outside of education as well.

Developing Closeness

Setting high expectations

One way instructors can develop closeness with youth is by establishing a high level of expectation in the environment. High expectations is a mindset instructors have when they believe their students can always achieve their full potential. This type of mentality is frequently seen as strict or authoritarian, whereas in actuality the purpose is to improve the quality of effort. In doing so, setting expectations institutes a strong culture of hard work and accountability, where there is both an



One way instructors can develop closeness with youth is by establishing a high level of expectation in the environment. High expectations is a mindset instructors have when they believe their students can always achieve their full potential.



expectation of individual effort and responsibility to peers (Wahl-Alexander et al., 2019). Consequently, this contributes to increased bonds and relationships among leaders/youth and further impacts the positive culture of the program. While there are a multitude of ways instructors can establish high expectations in their specific environment, setting achievable but challenging tasks, only praising exemplary behaviors, and demonstrating consistency are three simple techniques that can be easily integrated into any setting.

One way to establish high expectations is by providing youth with challenging but achievable tasks. If instructors set a standard of easily accomplished tasks, youth will learn that they can get away with giving minimal effort while still being successful. Cultivating a culture of hard work can be difficult, but the purpose is to push youth to accomplish objectives they did not think were possible. In an after-school program, this could look like integrating leadership roles where youth assist younger members in a subject area over which they have mastery, or within a sports setting, allowing different individuals to lead stretches, or a subsection of practice on a given day. Providing opportunities to be challenged not only fosters a culture of hard work but demonstrates to youth that the instructor trusts in their success. It is important for youth to be pushed, challenged or tasked with arduous responsibilities, so when these do arise, it demonstrates to the youth the instructor believes that they can do it successfully, which impacts how connected they feel to their instructor.

The next strategy to help establish high expectations is to praise only exemplary behaviors. Consistent praise can lose its power over time, especially if it is provided disingenuously, or for lackluster effort. When youth leaders praise a student too often, youth will become accustomed to this and the positive benefits will wear over time. For example, during a book club, if an instructor applauds youth whenever they select a new book to read, complete several chapters, and finish the book, the impact will quickly fade. However, if praise is provided when a higher-level task is completed (i.e., relating the book to real life), the praise will have a higher impact. Instructors should also assure that praise is focused on effort compared to end results, as demonstrating persistence and grit but still failing the task should constitute praiseworthy behaviors. For example, in

the sport setting, if an individual sets a goal of completing an advanced exercise such as a pull-up, and despite working for several months to increase their strength are unable to complete the goal, there is still great opportunity to praise their commitment to the process. This helps youth understand that their effort is the greatest facilitator of positive results and gives them increased perceived competency for achieving future tasks, as opposed to attributing their success to external factors such as luck.

Regardless of the setting, consistency is another key way instructors can establish high expectations for youth with whom they work. This consists of instructors communicating youth expectations and reinforcing the message with actions. Expecting excellent student behaviors one day but ignoring poor misbehavior is a perfect example of inconsistency. This type of conduct is unclear and will likely lead to frustration, as youth are unsure what is expected of them from one day to the next. True consistency from youth leaders can be represented by their unwavering presence, successfully modeling behaviors, and a steady demeanor. The demonstration of this manner of consistency can be vital for youth who face inconsistency and stressors on a daily basis. Understanding and knowing they can count on consistency from instructors, especially during tougher situations, will lead to formulation of a trusting and resilient relationship.

Fostering distinctiveness

Another way instructors can cultivate feelings of closeness with youth is by developing group identity and distinctiveness. Within an instructional climate, identity and distinctiveness can be established by creating unity, cohesion and a sense of togetherness among a group of children. This can be manifested by cocreating rules, personalized handshakes, utilizing a consistent slogan or mantra related to programmatic aims, or incorporating custom clothing, all with the primary objective of creating affiliation. Instructors could instill feelings of distinctness in an after-school basketball program by having participants select a team song with which they closely identify (e.g., “Remember the Name” by Fort Minor). Not only could the team warm up to this song each session, but they could name offensive or defensive plays after certain lyrics and give nicknames based on favorite portions of the song.

Developing a distinctive environment can transpire in a multitude of other ways as well. Within an all-girl youth physical activity setting, an instructor could spearhead creating a personalized camp motto, one that represents their readiness to engage and participate in physical activity. These youth might select a motto of, “Camp hair don’t care,” or “Neither hair nor there,” representing their excitement and enthusiasm around letting their hair down to have fun and play. Taking this a step further, custom T-shirts could be created with this slogan on the back. This shirt could be worn daily, establishing and enhancing a culture of being comfortable, and empowered to embrace every state of their hair, despite the physicality of the day. Another option is to wear this shirt during special occasions (i.e., “crazy hair day”), where the female participants could compete in customized programming with the goal of building

community by wearing their shirts and a unique hairstyle during out-of-the-ordinary activities. There are a multitude of different methods instructors can utilize to integrate distinctiveness into their learning environment. Although seemingly small, these meaningful areas of distinctiveness build on cohesion, making youth groups feel inimitable, which helps to develop closeness. Employing a distinctive approach will open the lines of communication and foster comradery while concurrently establishing higher-quality relationships between youth.

Avoiding Conflict

Using inclusive language

One way instructors can avoid conflict is by using culturally responsive language. Culturally responsive language is being intentionally inclusive of individuals from historically disadvantaged populations that would commonly be excluded based on different classifications (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation; Siwatu, 2007). Instructors can incorporate this strategy by using language that discards preexisting biases and incorporates the assets and strengths of all students. There are several ways to do this, including using gender-neutral terminology and avoiding harmful language.

Even though the Supreme Court recently ruled that individuals who identify as gay and transgender are protected under antidiscrimination laws (*Altitude Express Inc. v. Zarda*, 2020), most of our everyday language excludes people who do not identify as male or female. Gender-neutral terminology can be defined as inclusive language that minimizes biases toward a certain sex or social gender. In physical education, or other sporting contexts, this can be integrated by avoiding terms such as, “you guys,” or pronouns such as, “she, her, hers, him.” Instead, use terms like, “folks,” “everyone,” “them,” or “you all.” Another way to use gender-neutral terminology is to utilize diction that does not assume sexual orientation; for example, “significant other” or “partner.” The use of gender-neutral terminology avoids the risk of language being interpreted as biased, discriminatory or demeaning. Using this language helps to create a culturally sensitive environment and culture of care, while simultaneously avoiding potential conflicts.

Unfortunately, harmful language, or microaggressions, do exist, especially when working with disadvantaged populations. Microaggressions are indirect, subtle, unintentional behaviors or actions that discriminate against or target a person based solely on their race and ethnicity (Williams, 2020). One example of a microaggression is asking an African American student, “How long did it take to braid your hair?” Although the intention of the instructor was to foster closeness by observing something new, African Americans are often stigmatized by their hairstyle choice, texture and color in school, among other settings. Therefore, the comment is discriminatory and can open the door for potential conflict. A more appropriate comment could be to discuss something less stigmatizing, like their new sweatshirt or sneakers or weekend activities. Youth leaders working with students across different races or ethnic backgrounds can come across pronunciation of names with which they are not familiar. This might occur during attendance,

where a youth leader comes across a student’s name they are unsure how to pronounce. The culturally responsive approach includes briefly pulling that student aside and asking for proper pronunciation, and subsequently apologizing if incorrect. The culturally irresponsible behavior would be to ask to use a nickname that is “easier” for the instructor to pronounce. This response, which occurs far too often, will make the child feel insecure, uncomfortable and likely tarnish the potential for a future positive relationship. These seemingly small microaggressions decrease the potential for conflict that can increase the likelihood of exclusion, amplifying the chance of conflict arising regardless of the setting.

Speaking from one’s own experiences

In order to decrease the likelihood of causing conflict, instructors should only attempt to speak from their own personal experiences (Hooker, 2016). Speaking from personal experiences can be classified differently, depending on the population with whom instructors are working. When speaking with youth from marginalized groups, educators should take into account how their distinct set of beliefs, expectations and ideas about the world based on their personal experiences may differ from that of their students. One strategy for avoiding conflict is to use “I statements,” followed by “you questions.” For example, if a youth is struggling to get along with a teammate or classmate, instead of saying, “You should go talk to them and try to resolve the issue,” the more culturally responsive practice would be to inquire if the youth would prefer to vent or if they want input or advice. If they seek input or guidance, at this stage sharing your personal perspective that the student should try to discuss the conflict in an attempt to work things out is acceptable. However, educators can follow up on the advice, expressing that “this is just my viewpoint based on growing up in a household where we openly discussed conflict and frustrations.” An ap-



The key strategies that initiate closeness with youth are setting high expectations, paying attention to subtle intricacies such as language, and developing a distinctive and unique team environment.

appropriate follow-up response would be, “How are you most comfortable handling this situation?” Providing insight without asserting individual preconceived biases from lived experiences will likely aid in avoiding potential conflict with youth.

This can transpire even with the most inconspicuous comments. On a rainy morning, an instructor might start class asking, “Did any of your parents have trouble driving you to school this morning because of all that rain?” While it may appear harmless, it is likely some students took public transportation, walked, or drove with friends or other family members. A more appropriate, culturally sensitive conversation starter for the teacher could be, “How are we feeling about all this rain this morning?” or, “Does the rain impact your mood?” Everyone has experienced the rain and these questions allow all students to be able to actively contribute to the conversation, granting full inclusivity. These may appear like small delineations, but the latter phrasing ensures a majority of youth are included, reducing the likelihood of causing any potential conflict.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to provide tangible strategies that promote closeness and reduce conflict, leading to stronger relationships with students of any age. The key strategies that initiate closeness with youth are setting high expectations, paying attention to subtle intricacies such as language, and developing a distinctive and unique team environment. In order to build that closeness, physical educators must value relationship building and stay consistent in their efforts. The more consistent instructors are, the more likely they will build a closer relationship with their students.

The same approach can be utilized when instructors are avoiding conflict. The two strategies to avoid conflict include using culturally responsive language and instructors always speaking from their own experiences. Instructors can build closeness with youth by sharing their experiences and not making assumptions about the youths’ experiences. Further, teachers can avoid conflict by using language that is inclusive and culturally sensitive despite their socioeconomic background, race, or gender. The more the physical educators can avoid harmful language and speak from their own experience the easier it will be to build stronger relationships with their students. The benefits of strong relationships include higher performances, feelings of emotional safety and security, social-emotional skills, social relationship experience, and less aggressive behavior or distress. These skills are essential in helping youth participate in and experience positive, supportive environments and help them to cultivate strong relationship skills in the future.

References

Altitude Express Inc. v. Zarda. 590 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. 2020). <https://www.lexisnexis.com/community/casebrief/p/casebrief-zarda-v-altitude-express-inc>

Ang, R. P., Ong, S. L., & Li, X. (2020). Student version of the teacher-student relationship inventory (S-TSRI): development, validation

and invariance. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11; <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01724>.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss: Attachment*; John Bowlby. Basic books.

Graziano, P. A., Reavis, R. D., Keane, S. P., & Calkins, S. D. (2007). The role of emotion regulation in children’s early academic success. *Journal of School Psychology*, 45(1), 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2006.09.002>

Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2001). Early teacher-child relationships and the trajectory of children’s school outcomes through eighth grade. *Child Development*, 72(2), 625–638. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00301>

Hooker, D. A. (2016). In *The little book of transformative community conferencing: A hopeful, practical approach to dialogue* (pp. 47–55). Essay, Good Books.

Martin, A. J., & Dowson, M. (2009). Interpersonal relationships, motivation, engagement, and achievement: Yields for theory, currents issues, and educational practice. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 327–365. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654308325583>

Mason, B. A., Hajovsky, D. B., McCune, L. A., & Turek, J. J. (2017). Conflict, closeness, and academic skills: A longitudinal examination of the teacher-student relationship. *School Psychology Review*, 46(2), 177–189. <https://doi.org/10.17105/SPR-2017-0020.V46-2>

Pianta, R. C. (1999). *Enhancing relationships between children and teachers*. American Psychological Association.


Roorda, D. L., Koomen, H. M., Spilt, J. L., & Oort, F. J. (2011). The influence of affective teacher-student relationships on students’ school engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic approach. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(4), 493–529. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311421793>

Siwatu, K. O. (2007). Preservice teachers’ culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy and outcome expectancy beliefs. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 23(7), 1086–1101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2006.07.011>

Williams, M. T. (2020). Microaggressions: Clarification, evidence, and impact. *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science*, 15(1), 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619827499>

Valiente, C., Lemery-Chalfant, K., Swanson, J., & Reiser, M. (2008). Prediction of children’s academic competence from their effortful control, relationships, and classroom participation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 100(1), 67–77. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.100.1.67>

Verschueren, K., & Koomen, H. M. (2012). Teacher-child relationships from an attachment perspective. *Attachment & Human Development*, 14(3), 205–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2012.672260>

Wahl-Alexander, Z., Jacobs, J. M., & Mack, T. (2019). Lessons learned from the field: Teaching in high-risk physical education environments. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 90(5), 8–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2019.1580638> 

Gabrielle Bennett is a doctoral research fellow in the department of kinesiology and physical education at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL.

Zachary Wahl-Alexander (zwahlalexander@niu.edu) is an associate professor in the department of kinesiology and physical education at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL.

Jenn M. Jacobs is an associate professor in the department of kinesiology and physical education at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, IL.