

How can trusting relationships with adults boost student success?

THIS RESOURCE IS FOR



Teachers



Principals



Counselors

INTRODUCTION

Teachers, principals, counselors, and other school staff have opportunities to connect with students during each school day. How can schools make the most of these touchpoints? Having trusting and supportive relationships with students is a promising strategy to help students develop both academic and non-academic skills. Research suggests that students who connect with at least one trusted adult in school are more resilient and have a stronger sense of well-being.^{1,2}

REL Southwest completed [an Ask A REL reference desk response](#) on the influence of developing relationships of trust with students on a number of positive outcomes. Designing rigorous causal research on a topic such as trusting relationships can be very difficult; in its absence, case study, qualitative, and correlational research has explored outcomes associated with relationship building in the school environment. See what the research suggests about the effects associated with trusting relationships between students and teachers:

EFFECTS OF TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

Supportive relationships with students may increase student engagement and academic success:



Student Motivation

Middle school students who reported strong, supportive relationships with their teachers also received better grades and reported being more motivated than their peers.³



Self-Efficacy

Encouragement from teachers may also help students take control of their own learning, which allows students to develop their own sense of self-efficacy, or belief in one's own abilities.⁴



Academic Achievement

Research indicates that setting expectations for students and following up on those expectations in a supportive manner is related to increased motivation and academic achievement.³



Classrooms with supportive student-teacher connections may also foster stronger peer connections. Students report having better relationships with their peers when they have stronger relationships with their teachers.^{5,6} Supportive classrooms allow students to observe and practice respectful behavior, supportive interactions, and attention to the needs of others.⁶



Trusting relationships may also help teachers improve their instruction. Teachers also reported that having trusting relationships with students allowed them to expand learning opportunities for students, taking more intellectual risks.³ In addition, students who have strong, supportive relationships with teachers are more likely to self-regulate and stay on task, giving teachers the opportunity to cover more content and attend to the needs of each individual student.⁶

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO TO STRENGTHEN TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS?



Understanding the research is key, but understanding your individual students is also critical.

Research indicates that student motivation decreases when teachers try to push for unrealistic expectations or provide too much hands-on guidance.^{3,4} To foster the best possible outcomes, it is important to know your students, their boundaries, their learning styles, and their perspectives on the learning environment. Professional development is available around peer support, whole-class monitoring, and scaffolds for student autonomy to help teachers support trusting relationships with their students.⁴

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information about building supportive and trusting relationships with students, please visit the following resources from the REL Network:

- [The effects of building trusting relationships with students](#) (REL Southwest Ask A REL)
- [Supporting equity and social and emotional learning](#) (REL Midwest archived webinar)
- [Integrating a focus on equity into social and emotional learning](#) (REL Midwest infographic)
- [Shifting the current school climate: Sense of belonging and social and emotional learning](#) (REL Northwest infographic)

REFERENCES

- ¹ Meltzer, A., Muir, K., & Craig, L. (2016.) The role of trusted adults in young people's social and economic lives. *Youth and Society*, 50(5), 575–592. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1181392>.
- ² Bellis, M.A., Hardcastle, K., Ford, K., et al. (2017.) Does continuous trusted adult support in childhood impart life-course resilience against adverse childhood experiences - a retrospective study on adult health-harming behaviours and mental well-being. *BMC Psychiatry*, 17(110). <https://bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-017-1260-z>.
- ³ Davis, H. A. (2006). Exploring the contexts of relationship quality between middle school students and teachers. *Elementary School Journal*, 106(3), 193–224. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ750494>.
- ⁴ Kiefer, S. M., Alley, K. M., & Ellerbrock, C. R. (2015). Teacher and peer support for young adolescents' motivation, engagement, and school belonging. *RMLE Online: Research in Middle Level Education*, 38(8). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1074877>
- ⁵ Patrick, H., Ryan, A. M., & Kaplan, A. (2007). Early adolescents' perceptions of the classroom social environment, motivational beliefs, and engagement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(1), 83–98. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ754549>.
- ⁶ 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. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED565373>.

If you have questions about education research, [submit them](#) to the REL program's Ask A REL reference desk! You can also [browse archived REL Southwest responses](#) to see what the research says about previous education research questions.



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