

## Developing Positive Relationships

*Positive relationships* are interpersonal bonds that feel authentic, safe, stable, and nurturing. In the school setting, positive relationships between students and teachers can counter the negative impacts of childhood trauma, while partnerships between families and schools can play a role in transforming learning environments.

### Evidence base

Several decades of research point to the importance of positive student–teacher relationships in improving outcomes for multiple demographic groups in various classroom contexts (Kincade et al., 2020). For example, higher quality student–teacher relationships are associated with improved student behavior, social functioning, classroom engagement, and academic achievement (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Similarly, positive student–teacher relationships have been found to increase teacher self-efficacy and sense of well-being (Spilt et al., 2011).

Further, a meta-analysis of 61 studies, including 88,417 students from preschool to high school, found that positive student–teacher relationships were associated with improved school engagement and achievement, while negative student–teacher relationships were associated with decreased engagement and achievement (Roorda et al., 2011).



## Implementation resources and considerations

In addition to multiple evidence-based interventions (e.g., Good Behavior Game, Check and Connect; What Works Clearinghouse, 2023), several proactive direct and indirect teacher practices have been identified as common elements of programs with significant, positive impacts on student–teacher relationships (Kincade et al., 2020), including:

Proactive direct practices	Indirect practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Praise</li> <li>• Demonstrating respect</li> <li>• One-on-one time</li> <li>• Coaching and validating emotions</li> <li>• Regular check-ins</li> <li>• Reflective and supportive listening</li> <li>• Positive greetings at the door</li> <li>• Expressing care</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Predictable classroom rules and routines</li> <li>• Parental involvement</li> <li>• Student choice and empowerment</li> <li>• Clear transitions and down time</li> <li>• Peer-assisted learning strategies</li> <li>• Positive notes to parents</li> <li>• Establishing a sense of responsibility</li> <li>• Classwide meetings</li> </ul>

Programs with higher frequencies of proactive direct practices demonstrated higher effect sizes for creating close, positive student–teacher relationships (Kincade et al., 2020). These practices may be the active ingredient in programs aimed at improving student–teacher relationships and, rather than spending money on expensive packages, it may be most cost-effective for educators to focus on the high-quality use of specific practices. However, to reach sustained implementation, schools should provide teachers with a range of implementation support, such as motivation, ongoing training, consultation, and feedback to reach full adoption of the practices (Cook et al., 2019; Robinson, 2022).

In addition to implementation support, school leaders can encourage school staff to regularly assess their perceived relationships with students and track changes over time. Measures such as the Student–Teacher Relationship Scale (Pianta, 2001) prompt educators to rate various aspects of their relationship with individual students. The Student–Teacher Relationship Scale then returns scores on the dimensions of conflict and closeness, which can help educators target improvements in specific areas of relationship building.

*This handout summarizes the evidence base and implementation considerations for developing positive relationships, a trauma-engaged practice from the **Transforming Schools: Trauma-Engaged Toolkit** (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, n.d.). Leadership teams from Alaska Alternative School Coalition schools can use these evidence briefs to make decisions about which trauma-engaged practice to field test.*

## References

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