

# 7

## THE POWER OF POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

### Chapter objectives



- To explore what constitutes a healthy relationship
- To examine issues of power and control
- To identify ways to establish positive relationships with challenging students
- To explore repairing and rebuilding teacher–student relationships
- To reflect on engaging with families when behaviour is a concern
- To emphasise the centrality of peer relationships
- To explore collegiality and teamwork.

### WHAT IS A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP?

If you ask people what they want in their relationships they come up with the following:

- Mutual respect
- Trust and honesty
- Reciprocity – give and take
- Acceptance of you as a whole person
- Good, open communication
- Equality
- Warmth
- Reliable alliance – being there for you in good times and bad
- Feeling comfortable and enjoyment in each other's company.



#### Questions for reflection and discussion

How do you want to be treated by others?

What do others do and say that makes you feel comfortable and what do they do and say that makes you feel unsafe?

## BEING IN CHARGE OR BEING IN CONTROL

A healthy relationship is where there is equality, shared decision-making and no individual controls what happens. A controlling relationship does not model healthy relationship skills, undermines protective factors in resilience, does not internalise pro-social values, can lead to resentment, is exhausting and reduces the chance of pro-social behaviour. It is at the far end of controlling relationships we find bullying and abuse.

Relationships between teachers and students are already unequal because a teacher has more power than a student. Using this authority to empower others is a more intelligent way to promote positive behaviour than asserting power over others.

A common discourse on teacher–student relationships is that a ‘good’ teacher has to be in control of their students. The evidence shows otherwise. A good teacher certainly does not let students run riot but does give them a say in what happens. A teacher who is able to be in charge of proceedings in the classroom, orchestrate events, lead, support, guide, encourage participation, provide timely feedback and be responsive to individuals as well as the group does not need to control students. An effective educator encourages self-control and believes in the ability of students to learn this.

Do we want pupils who do as they are told because they will get into trouble otherwise, or students who think for themselves and choose to behave in considerate ways? It is in everyone’s interests to foster the latter. This is much easier when the whole school is behind this approach (see Chapter 12).

Glasser (1998) says external control is destructive to relationships and that being disconnected is the source of almost all human problems. He advocates seven caring habits to counter what he calls ‘deadly habits’ which undermine healthy relationships – see Table 7.1.

**Table 7.1**

Caring habit	Deadly habit	Example of a practical application in school
Supporting	Criticising	‘How can I help you?’
Encouraging	Blaming	‘Tomorrow is another day, let’s try again then.’
Listening	Complaining	‘What happened? What did you want to happen?’
Accepting	Nagging	‘That didn’t go well. How can we move on and make this better?’
Trusting	Threatening	‘I will come back later and see how you have got on.’
Respecting	Punishing	‘The decision is yours – but you need to know the consequences.’
Negotiating difference	Bribing, rewarding to control	‘Let’s see if we can both get what we want here?’



### Case studies: alternative views

School 1: A group of university students were aiming to introduce Circle Time with a year 5 class, keeping to the principles of respect, inclusion, safety and democracy. The pupils were not used to being given choice and freedom. One pupil offered the following advice: *'You have to control us you know, because we can't control ourselves'*. This is what they had heard and was now what they believed. When their teacher was not there to 'keep control', they behaved in the way they had been led to expect of themselves.

School 2: *'At first, when the children would not listen the teacher would intervene and shout at them, defeating the whole purpose of Circle Time. When she fully understood the principles she changed her approach and then we saw some real changes in the students'* (university student working in a school).



### Question for reflection and discussion

Can you think of an example which clarifies the difference between being in charge of a situation and being in control of other people?

## WHAT WORKS IN ESTABLISHING GOOD STUDENT–TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS?

Relationships between pupils and staff are widely recognised to be critical in creating healthy school environments and fostering pupils' mental wellbeing (Hornby & Atkinson, 2003). The literature points to the teacher–pupil relationship as being particularly significant for excluded pupils (Pomeroy, 1999, 2000) and 'hard to teach' pupils (Ennis & McCaulay, 2002; Spratt et al., 2006). Positive relationships are a significant factor in classroom behaviour. They inhibit difficult situations arising in the first place and provide a cushion when challenges do arise.

Relationships are enacted by what is said and not said and messages that are given about value and expectations. Words are powerful. We need to be aware not only of how we can use them to positive effect but also of the potential for damage. Imagine the following scenario – this is fictional but the example is all too real in some classrooms.

Ms Robinson sees herself as a friendly and tolerant teacher who maintains good standards of behaviour with her 7-year-old students. She smiles at children as they arrive and never raises her voice. Unfortunately some individuals, mostly boys, do not meet her high expectations. One such boy, Toby, often arrives late. As he creeps into the room, all the other children are sitting on the carpet. 'Well, look who's here' says Ms Robinson. She raises her eyebrows, which makes everyone else giggle and addresses the class.

'What are we going to do with him, children?' Someone calls out 'Make him miss playtime'. Others begin to join in with other suggestions. Toby stands alone, looking embarrassed. 'Just sit down Toby, you can see how upset everyone is with you'. Lateness is not the only thing that displeases Ms Robinson. Toby is untidy, does not always wait his turn and frequently asks others what he is supposed to do. Every day he is ridiculed for his slowness and other inadequacies and told how hopeless he is. The other children either shun or taunt him, following their teacher's example.



### Questions for reflection and discussion

Have you come across educators who attempt to control students in this way?

What do you envisage will happen (a) to Toby and (b) to the other students in his class if this continues?

What might change the teacher's belief that this is an appropriate response?

There are, however, countless stories of the positive difference that teachers have made to the lives of pupils experiencing adversity, either temporary or long-term.

*I had a hard time at home and at school and this one teacher made a real difference for me. He showed that he cared whether I was there or not, whether I learnt anything. He didn't give up on me. It's because of him that I stayed in school. I don't think teachers should say 'it's up to you whether or not you learn' – it makes it seem they don't care about you. (trainee teacher).*

Developing good relationships, especially with potentially more challenging students, means showing the student he or she matters as a person. Specific actions can be summarised as follows:

- Greet by name and smile so you look pleased to see them.
- Show an interest; find out something about their life and ask the occasional question; avoid interrogation!
- Find something you have in common – for example a team you both support, a TV programme you both watch: this provides safe ground for conversation and develops a relationship that is not about what is going on at school.
- Find something you can genuinely admire and comment positively on these qualities. Attributing to the student resourcefulness, humour, protectiveness, spirit in the face of adversity, etc. provides them with an alternative self-concept.
- Give regular positive feedback which is specific, genuine and brief.
- Let them know you believe they are worth your continued effort.

- Consistently show that their success, safety and wellbeing is of concern to you – just the phrase ‘Are you OK?’ will help.
- Model courtesy – take a second to open a door for them, say please and thank you.
- Tell the student what you enjoy about teaching them – exaggerate a small positive if necessary!

Show acceptance of the person but not their behaviour by:

- Remembering that information is much easier to hear than accusation – state what students are expected to do
- Using ‘I’ statements: ‘I need you to ...’ – rather than ‘you’ statements: ‘You are ...’
- Giving limited choices that offer the student some control and promote self-efficacy, for example: ‘What would you like to do first, this or that?’

Develop a sense of inclusion and belonging by:

- Providing experiences which guarantee success – however small
- Framing behaviour in terms of equity rights, for example: ‘You are not allowed to hurt another student because other students are not allowed to hurt you’
- Giving students a specific responsibility and positive feedback for this – this has to be something they are able and willing to do
- Using the words ‘we’ and ‘our’ to include, not to exclude
- Avoiding unfavourable comparisons or put-downs
- Doing everything possible to avoid or limit sanctions that exclude students
- Speaking about the student positively to others
- Repeating back to the student anything positive you hear from others – particularly valuable for students who arrive in school with a negative reputation, it helps reduce self-fulfilling expectations
- When they are in trouble show some sympathy: ‘you’re not having the best day’.

## WHY DO RELATIONSHIPS BREAK DOWN?

On the surface it may appear that teacher–student relationships break down because of specific interactions between individuals. Sometimes this culminates in explosive incidents where both parties blame the other. It is, however, the interaction of complex perceptions and feelings over time and within systems that determine how people relate at any given moment. What goes on in a classroom is influenced by school culture and differing values between stakeholders. It is also the result of emotions and expectations that have evolved over time. A young person who anticipates rejection or failure is more likely to respond negatively to innocuous comments and feel hurt and angry. The example below illustrates this.



### Case study

Thirteen-year-old Matt came into the counsellor's office with his cap on back-to-front and his head down. He had just returned from a three-day suspension. This had been handed out to him after his verbal abuse to his music teacher. Matt was not contrite. *'She just hates my guts – the moment I walk in the door she's at me. She never asks me, she just tells me and then if I don't jump to it she starts having a go. I hate her. Other teachers are OK – they let me be.'* Matt was not a student with long-term difficulties – there were problems at home that were making him edgy and reactive. Most teachers understood his current sensitivities and were careful not to throw fuel onto a burning ember. The music teacher was not prepared to make any allowances and their relationship had broken down. She was not having such a good time either.



### Questions for reflection and discussion

What might this teacher have done differently here when Matt entered her lesson, when she wanted him to do something and when he was not immediately compliant?

What beliefs were influencing her actions and what might help her respond differently?

Emotions differ depending on what has been triggered recently. If the student has had a terrible weekend or a confronting incident in an earlier class then the teacher is likely to have a bruised ego to contend with. Feelings are also linked to expectations: if a student's past experience with history has been fraught then a history teacher might be in for a more testing time than a sports teacher where experiences have been happier. If, however, a positive relationship has been established then the impact of earlier events will be moderated by the student's expectations of safety and support.

Teachers also bring their own constructs and emotions into any situation. The school system impacts on these. A teacher may feel supported as a member of an emotionally literate culture or fearful of criticism within an authoritarian one.

## A RANGE OF TEACHER RESPONSES TO STUDENT CHALLENGE

The following constructs determine how a teacher might respond in challenging situations. These are just a few of the possibilities:

- I will not be seen as a good teacher if this student gets away with not doing as I say.
- This young person seems to be having a hard time.
- I am going to pretend this isn't happening – it is safer to ignore this student.
- I'm in control here – how dare this person defy me.

- This student is making my life a misery.
- This student has a personality disorder.
- I need to reduce the tension in my classroom.
- I don't think it's right that I should have to deal with such behaviour in my class.
- I'm scared I might get hurt.
- People who don't want to learn shouldn't be here.
- Conflict can be resolved once things have calmed down.
- I just feel incompetent and stupid when this happens – it must be my fault.
- I need to find out more about what is going on.



### Questions for reflection and discussion

Which of the constructs above might be helpful in a challenging situation and which are not? Why?

## REASONS FOR REBUILDING

An entrenched relationship breakdown often occurs because each individual feels the other does not like or respect them or wants to 'win' control over the outcome. Neither takes responsibility for their contribution to the breakdown and neither will back down. A situation may be relieved if someone in the relationship leaves but this does not address the root cause. Those who have not developed ways to rebuild relationships will continue to be faced with unresolved relational difficulties elsewhere. Making the effort to repair a relationship may have far-reaching outcomes for that young person's future, and is also beneficial to teachers over the longer term. It shows a young person they are worth the effort, keeps them connected to school, and provides a powerful model for skilled social interaction and personal effectiveness. Another reason for teachers taking the initiative to rebuild relationships is self-interest. Not only will life in the classroom be more peaceful with this particular student but relationship building brings credibility with others in the class. Once a teacher has developed positive relationship management with one student these skills generalise to other difficult situations.

## OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO REPAIR

In students, the biggest barrier to repairing relationships is the extent to which they have lost trust in others or belief in themselves. For older students who have had few positive experiences and little reason to affiliate to school, the barriers may be harder, though not impossible, to shift. For younger pupils and those with more recent or temporary difficulties there is a good chance of rebuilding.

The barrier to repair in teachers may be because they blame the student, sometimes exclusively. Teachers may say students know what behaviour is acceptable and should therefore conform to what is 'right'. If the breakdown is squarely placed on the student it follows that they will be required to make the first step towards any repair. This may be a demand to apologise, make amends, or promise better behaviour in the future. Students who feel they have been treated unfairly are unlikely to respond positively to this 'opportunity' to acknowledge they are at fault, especially at the height of the conflict. They may later grudgingly do what is required to prevent suspension or other punishment but this does not do a great deal for future interactions – it simply serves to confirm the construct that those in authority are out to get you. Teachers have power and authority in the school system. They can use this to insist on student conformity to the rules or they can re-frame their role as a responsibility to initiate mediation. This does not mean condoning unacceptable behaviour but getting a fuller picture of the student's interpretations, acknowledging that misunderstanding or over-hastiness may have contributed to the breakdown and that there are times when emotions on both sides can get out of hand.



### **Question for reflection and discussion**

How prepared are you to take some responsibility for a relationship not going well and make the first step towards reconciliation?

## **RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS AND CARERS**

*The great majority of pupils enjoy school, work hard and behave well. A strong sense of community and positive engagement with parents are features of schools where behaviour is good (Ofsted, 2005, p. 5).*

The statement above summarises both research findings and my own experiences. In schools where thought is given to working effectively with parents, especially where there are behavioural issues, situations often improve. The opposite is also true. Presenting parents with a list of misdemeanours their child is said to have perpetrated is unlikely to be helpful in establishing a collaborative relationship. Parents will either be overcome with shame and embarrassment or become defensive and/or angry. Teachers' frustration with 'not getting the message across' rarely acknowledges that parents have a different but equally important role to fulfil. This is to defend their child and get their needs met. Sometimes, however, parents reduce the threat to themselves by joining in with the negative, blaming discourse. This leaves the student with no advocate.

Research (Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Roffey, 2002) indicates that there are ways to engage parents of pupils with behavioural difficulties that are more effective than others. These guidelines can be summarised as follows.

**Send positive messages home on a regular basis:** Some parents have not had a good experience of school themselves. They may feel inadequate in their parenting skills or be fearful of judgement on these. Sending positive messages home promotes positive home–school interactions to break down potential negativity and intimidation and can serve to give ideas about good parenting skills. It also provides an opportunity for a positive interaction between parent and child. The following examples suggest ways in which this might be achieved with minimal effort.

*We introduced reward postcards. Each day every teacher was expected to send one reward postcard home to a set of parents/carers. The focus for the reward would change on a weekly basis to ensure that the widest possible number of students became eligible. One week the focus might be on best homework produced, on another biggest improvement in effort, or highest quality of work achieved today. This had the effect of improving relationships with parents who were tired of receiving letters and phone calls when things went wrong (Steer Report, DfES, 2005, p. 18).*

*Phone hugs – once a week, choose two students and make a phone call home. Just let the parent know that the student is going along nicely and you wanted them to know that. This will make the next conversation much easier when you have not so good news (Hansberry, 2008, p. 2).*

**Have informal conversations where possible, the earlier the better:** Many parents find formal meetings intimidating so a chat in the playground is the place to start if you can. Make sure no one can overhear anything confidential or negative. This informality is harder for working parents and in high schools but a one-to-one after school in the first instance may be all that is needed. This can also establish a good relationship with the parent, which will help later if things don't improve. Invite parents to see you with a letter or phone call saying that you would value their help in finding the best way to support their child. Begin the meeting with an initial positive statement followed by an open-ended question such as: *'How is [student name] finding school at the moment – what does she say to you at home?'* Then state your concern for the child: *'She seems to be unhappy much of the time/ having some problems settling to work/ getting along with other pupils. I'm not sure what's going on and want to help, do you have any thoughts about this?'*

**Position parents as experts on their child:** Parents may not be experts on education or child development but they usually know their child better than anyone. Ask questions about their history and development, interests, what comforts the child, what gains their cooperation and so on. Some parents will only want you to tell you about problems. It takes skill to empathise with but not condone a negative view. Ask them what support they have, what they have tried that works. They may say they use physically punitive methods to instil discipline. Unless this is a child protection issue that needs to be reported, this is not the time to confront parents. Point out that these strategies are not allowed in schools, so we have to look elsewhere. If you work to engage parents and increase their trust in you, there will be future opportunities to discuss more positive behavioural approaches. Such a conversation not only promotes a positive home–school relationship it also raises parents' sense of confidence, importance and responsibility in their role.

**Be positive:** In all verbal and written communications begin by saying something positive about the student. You may have to dig deep but this engages the parent and

lets them know that you will be balanced in your approach and have the student's best interests at heart. It also reassures them about their parenting and promotes a more positive view of the child. Try such phrases as: *'Brandon is such an independent little boy'; 'Martha has great spirit'; 'I have seen a really caring side of Akbar this week'.*

**Stay focused on the needs of the child:** However tempted you may be, do not talk about your needs as a teacher or those of the class, it does not get parents on-side – it is their child they are interested in.

**Seek commonalities:** Parents may see things differently from you. Do not try to fight for your view to be dominant. Seek what you have in common and look at how you might work together in meeting the student's needs.

**Make decisions together:** Some parents will agree to anything at a meeting but find that their lives make it impossible to carry out such actions. Ask for their ideas and check what is realistic. One parent of a child with special needs (and other family commitments) once said that all the professionals she ever met announced that: *'This will only take five to 10 minutes a day'*. She felt constantly guilty about not fitting in all those 10 minutes of different interventions and feared the professionals would see her as someone who didn't care about her child.

**Maintain good communication:** Parents usually want to know what is going on at school and prefer contact that is regular, respectful, positive, private and two-way.

*I can phone the school and leave a message (about things that have happened at home) and they understand. That's been helpful to act as a brake so the difficulties don't just escalate.*

Listening to parents' concerns is crucial:

*Teachers actually talked to me, explained things and listened to me. I think that was the most important thing – they listened to me.*

**Take account of family contexts:** This could include work commitments and other demands such as caring responsibilities. Other concerns (health, finance, relational) may also be overwhelming. Although you may not be able to do much about these, it is helpful for parents to know you are taking them into consideration. For instance, ask when would be the best time for them to come to a meeting. The following quote is from a parent who is herself a teacher in tertiary education:

*It wasn't just irritating, it was infuriating. Can you imagine what it is like to be in the middle of a lesson, you are called to the phone, you are completely distracted from your job – and it was nothing horrendous, boys' pranks, couldn't it have waited?*

**Structure more formal meetings with care:**

- Give enough notice and ask what time suits parents best.
- Ask parents if they would like to bring a friend or supporter. This is particularly helpful for lone mothers. It provides emotional support, a person to talk to afterwards and someone who can help the parent remember what was said. They can also help with young children if necessary.

- Provide toys for young children who may be present.
- Do not have a pre-meeting between education professionals with parents waiting outside; it does not communicate respect.
- Limit the number of professionals attending if this is likely to be intimidating.
- Start meetings on time, check expectations about finishing and stick to what is agreed.
- Put everyone on the same level – sit in a circle on the same height chairs and use either first names or surnames for everyone: ask parents their preference.
- Beware of using educational jargon: words that are commonplace to teachers, such as ‘curriculum’ are not familiar to all parents. In particular do not use acronyms without explaining them first. Educators use short-hand all the time when speaking to each other without realising this can exclude others.
- Do not assume knowledge.
- Avoid giving parents material to read in a meeting: they cannot concentrate on this and they may have literacy difficulties.
- Be aware of cultural issues and provide an interpreter if necessary.
- Share air-space: actively encourage parental contributions to the discussion.
- Avoid interruptions: put a sign on the door and hold calls.
- Ask open-ended questions but do not interrogate.
- Smile, show warmth and empathy: avoid attributing blame, it leads nowhere.
- Keep the child’s needs central to the discussion.
- Do not go on the defensive or become bureaucratic by frequently referring to rules and policies.
- Bring the meeting to a close by allowing five minutes to summarise what has been agreed about the way forward.
- Give parents opportunities to ask questions and make it clear they can do this at other times.
- Arrange a review meeting.

**Allow parents to express feelings:** It can be an emotional experience talking about your child’s challenging behaviour. It may be difficult to separate this from feeling judged as inadequate as a parent. If a parent becomes tearful have a tissue on hand and tell them it isn’t surprising they are upset. If they are angry they may accuse you and the school of all manner of things. Acknowledge their feelings and allow them to have their say until they run out of steam. Interrupting to deny the accusations will make it go on longer and may make the situation worse. No one in a highly emotional state listens to reason. When they pause for breath perhaps offer them a cup of tea and the opportunity to discuss what to do for the best. Stay calm yourself by thinking how you are going to reward yourself for being such a paragon of emotional literacy. As with students, the calmer you are the sooner they will be.

### In cases where parents may be abusive

This goes beyond the expression of feelings to threatening language and gestures, constant shouting and swearing, intimidation and/or personal abuse. Ensure you are not alone in this situation.

Encourage everyone to be seated – this inhibits the escalation of aggression. If the parents have not calmed down within a short time tell them calmly but firmly that there are standards of behaviour in school which apply to both students and adults and that they are overstepping the line. You cannot deal with their concerns until this can be done in a mutually respectful manner. Ask when they can come and see you again. If parents are drunk or drugged on the premises ask them to leave and return when you can have a useful conversation about their concerns. If they refuse to go, leave yourself and inform senior staff members.



### Questions for reflection and discussion

In which ways could you position a parent of a child with challenging behaviour?  
What difference would this make to your interactions with them?

## Parents whose children are affected by the behaviour of others

When parents send their child to school they expect teachers to act ‘in loco parentis’ and provide the same level of care and protection they would. When their child is hurt on the school premises they may be understandably upset and demand retribution. Listen and take their concerns seriously:

- Let them have their say in full without interruption.
- Agree what is not acceptable so you find common ground.
- Show concern for their child.
- Do not make excuses for the behaviour but point out how you are teaching students what is acceptable and not.
- Look for any strengths/positives in the situation – support from peers, etc.
- If applicable, talk about how pupils are expected to take collective responsibility for each other’s safety.
- Adults cannot always protect children in every situation – our job is to help them develop skills to deal with adversity. Discuss ways in which their child is learning to deal with difficulties themselves and the support they need to do this.

It is wise to communicate behaviour policies with parents when their children first attend the school, with reminders as appropriate. Parents need to know how the school encourages pro-social behaviour and responds to behaviour that is unacceptable. They also need information on policies and practices designed to keep children safe. There are many adults who cannot see beyond punishment for problematic behaviour. Working to develop a different understanding takes ongoing communication about effective practice. This may also help parents learn facilitative parenting skills.

## RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENTS

(There is more on this throughout Chapter 6 and in all Circle Solutions activities.) Children and young people operate in two worlds. Their relationship with adults is one of dependence and inequality whereas relationships with peers are at the same level. To have friends children must reduce egocentricity and learn the 'rules' of relationships; which behaviours will support the maintenance of friendships and which will not.

Factors that impact on choices in social behaviour include the need for approval, the desire to be part of the group, empathy for others and moral values. Being pro-social depends on the interaction of relational skills, emotional factors and contextual cues – such as prior relationships and current expectations (Wentzel et al., 2007). This suggests that actively promoting relational values, knowledge and skills, together with opportunities for developing a sense of belonging, will have an impact over time.

Students with emotional and behavioural difficulties may have negative perceptions of others and often struggle with establishing positive interactions. Other students may be rejecting and inhibit the reinforcement of any new relational skills (Frederickson, 1991). SEL is therefore more effective within the mainstream classroom so all pupils learn about positive relationships, interact with all peers and take responsibility for inclusion.

Friendly behaviour establishes a threshold for closer friendships. Students need both the opportunities and skills to approach others, communicate effectively and behave in ways that foster positive interactions. They also need to know how to deal with conflict and problem-solve relational issues. As relationships change with development (Roffey et al., 1994) these issues need to be addressed throughout each phase of education.

There is evidence that SEL programmes are making a positive difference to behavioural issues in the classroom (McCarthy, 2009; Payton et al., 2008).

*It was remarkable to see the children that I had been working with since March [on Circle Time Solutions] working together as a team and creating friendships and bonds. ... No longer were they being disruptive and not talking to one another ... (university student).*

## RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN COLLEAGUES

Colleagues can boost your confidence or undermine it; they can be supportive or dismissive of your approach; they can build on what you are trying to develop with students or ridicule this. One answer to this is to build relationships with those who share your views and be simply polite with those who do not.

Pupils observe the interactions between staff and learn from what they see. How well do the relationships between teachers in school model what we want students to learn? If these are visibly warm, supportive and full of good humour, this leads to higher levels of social capital and relational trust. It is easier to respond thoughtfully to challenging behaviour in such an ethos, and be more resilient when things do not go well.

The way in which teachers talk to each other about what works in relation to behaviour is both influenced by and impacts on the culture of the school. Miller (1996) found a strong reluctance to share successful strategies. The reasons given included:

- The problems (and therefore solutions) belong to the teacher concerned, no-one else would be interested
- Fear that the teacher's initial difficulties with a student would be perceived as inadequacies in the role
- Fear that strategies would be dismissed as not making a sustainable difference
- A mismatch between the teacher's enthusiasm for working on behalf of the student and a punitive school culture
- Changes in students being attributed to factors outside school rather than as an outcome of strategies employed by teachers
- No one asking or being that interested
- Having to tread carefully not to offend the sensibilities of colleagues who had not been successful with that student in the past.



### Questions for reflection and discussion

How could successful interventions be shared between staff?  
What would need to be taken into consideration?

Rogers (2006) defines three dimensions to collegial relationships in schools: moral support, professional support and structural support.

## Moral support

This reduces the isolation that permeates so many teachers' professional lives. It gives the message that we are all in this together, we all have problems at times and need understanding and help from each other. Reciprocity is key. As Rogers says: '*accepting fallibility in oneself means acknowledging it and accepting it in others*'. It does not mean, however, not constructively addressing difficult issues. The key is *constructive*. Some colleagues may use moaning in staffroom conversations as a coping strategy but this can decrease rather than increase resilience. It does not promote responsibility for resolving problems and fosters feelings of helplessness and sometimes victimisation. In the worst scenarios negativity about students or families can permeate the ethos and become a dominant discourse, which needs to be challenged by school leaders. The trick is to show empathy for the difficulties colleagues are facing without colluding with their take on this.

The following makes school staff feel more connected. If you do this, others may follow:

- Make a point of greeting colleagues warmly.
- Sit down next to people and ask them how it's going – not just the colleagues you always sit next to.
- Find out about people outside the job – not in a nosy way but things they might want to talk about, like their family or holidays.
- Share a funny story or experience – ensuring it doesn't put anyone down. Humour promotes positive relationships, increases group cohesion and relieves tension.



### Case study

In one large special school everyone gets to know who has been their personal 'angel' on the last day of each term. At the beginning of term each member of staff picks the name of a colleague out of a hat. They are now the 'angel' for this person with a brief to simply watch over them. They do as much or as little in this role as they wish but actions have included organising a birthday cake, taking a playground duty when someone didn't feel well, putting positive notes or chocolate bars in their pigeon hole, sending a card home when they were off sick, offering to help out at a function, helping carry heavy loads as well as just having the occasional staffroom chat to check how things are going. Often teachers identify their 'angels' well before the end of term but not always. They love the system and feel it really helps, especially at the more stressful times of the term. Some enjoy the creativity involved in finding different ways to boost their colleague throughout the term.

Trust and respect are synonymous with healthy relationships. Respect includes courtesy and consideration. When work life is stressful these basic components of positive collegial interaction can be threatened. When the ethos of a school does not actively address negative behaviours such as rudeness, incivility or selfishness such as leaving a mess in the kitchen or talking over others in a staff meeting, everyone is affected. Positive relationships demands awareness of what is acceptable in the staffroom just as much as with student behaviour.

Respect also means acceptance of difference. People have different strengths and weaknesses and different opinions. In a healthy ethos this is acknowledged and discussed so that differences can be valued and put to good use to reach shared goals. That way lies cohesion rather than dissension. Respect means acknowledging and valuing people's efforts as well as their achievements (Roffey, 2005).

*In our weekly bulletin there is always something saying thank you to someone – not for just the big things. It makes you feel really good (teacher).*

*I feel valued and appreciated in the department I work in, and this reflects in my enthusiasm, input and dedication to students and staff in this department (teacher).*

Trust is about predictability – knowing you can rely on someone. When someone makes a point of regularly bad-mouthing their colleagues your own trust in them is dented as you wonder whether they may be doing the same to you. Trust will permeate a school if teachers have explored and agreed a shared vision. This also promotes collaboration, support and shared learning. When trust is placed in individuals alone it can disappear when those people leave (Hargreaves, 1994).

### Professional support

Professional support is where colleagues share information, resources, concerns and strategies. One way of doing this is peer support. This can have many faces, from problem-solving groups, to joint ventures, mentoring and coaching and being a ‘critical friend’. One of the advantages of peer support is that it is not about a power relationship in which one person is making judgements on another but working together towards agreed goals. At best it can enhance confidence and a sense of professionalism, reduce stress and increase enjoyment in the role (Rogers, 1999).

### Structural support

Structural support relates to policies, practices and systems within the school. It includes things like having a manageable workload and the resources you need to be effective. Communications are part of the structure – how people get information and the opportunities they have to contribute to policy development. It also covers how people work in teams.



#### **Question for reflection and discussion**

What similarities and differences are there in positive relationships with colleagues and positive relationships with students?

## SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES TO PROMOTE POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR

- Show students their wellbeing matters to you.
- Build positive relationships with parents and colleagues.
- Promote universal social and emotional learning.

## SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULTIES

- Spend a little time and effort making positive connections with challenging students.
- Use 'I' statements rather than accusatory 'you' statements.
- Be sure the words you use promote inclusion rather than marginalisation.
- Be prepared to make the first step to repair a relationship.
- Position parents/carers as experts on their child.
- Be sympathetic but do not collude with negativity in colleagues or parents.
- Share effective strategies with trusted colleagues.

### **Professional development activities for teachers**

#### ***Power and control: paired discussion***

What is the place of power in a healthy relationship?

What benefits does giving control back to students have for the teacher/for the students?

#### ***Family meeting: role play***

Two people play teachers, one a class teacher and one a senior teacher. Two play parents (or a parent and supporter) and the fifth is an observer.

The scenario is as follows:

Connor is 11. He has been in the school for six months. During that time he has been seen smoking in the grounds, verbally abused female staff, made obscene gestures to some of the girls and become the leader of a small group of boys who have been bullying and intimidating others. There are suspicions he is dealing drugs but no proof of this. His parents have been asked into school to talk about concerns. Connor is currently suspended from school.

Before you begin the role play each person thinks about:

1. your expectations
2. what you are hoping to achieve.

Role play the meeting for 15 minutes then stop and de-brief with the observer.

Consider the following:

- What did people feel: about themselves, the others in the meeting and the final outcome?
- What is there to build on, if anything?
- What might be different next time?
- What else might the school do in similar situations?

***Colleagues I have known***

In pairs talk to each other about supportive colleagues you have come across. What did they do and say that was helpful? What have you learned from them?

**Circle Solutions activities with students**

These activities will support students in developing a sense of belonging and responsibility for each other.

All Circles begin with a statement of the principles:

- When one person is speaking everyone else listens.
- You may pass if you do not want to say anything.
- There are no put-downs.

***Class web***

All students stand together in a tight circle. The facilitator holds one end of a ball of string and throws the rest of the ball across the Circle to a student saying their name. This person does the same until a web has been made in the centre. This web represents the class and the fact that everyone is connected.

***No put-downs***

In small groups discuss the following:

- What is a put-down?
- Has anyone put you down?
- What did they do?
- What did you feel?
- What did you do?

How might you go about developing a proposal for the whole school to be a 'No Put-Down Zone'? Write down what might need to go into a policy document.

***Sentence completions***

Going around the Circle students complete the following sentences.

- Being friendly means ...
- Sticking up for someone means ...
- This class is a friendly place to be when ...

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

### **What if this happened to you?**

Ask for volunteers to role-play this scenario for the whole Circle.

Ella: You are in a new school and haven't made friends yet. You miss your mates a lot. You are pleased that Chi and Brianna are spending some time with you.

Chi and Brianna: You don't get on so well with others in your class. You are interested in Ella when she arrives and try and to find out everything you can about her.

Scene 1: Conversation between Ella, Chi and Brianna finding out about each other.

Scene 2: Chi explains to Brianna that it would be a real laugh to put Ella's picture up on Facebook and let everyone know something about her, including some really personal information. Brianna isn't so sure but goes along with Chi as her friend.

Scene 3: Ella reads what has been written about her. It isn't nice.

Scene 4: Ella comes into school and asks Chi and Brianna why they did that. Chi and Brianna attack her for not being 'fun' to be around. Ella is left stranded.

Facilitator asks the actors:

- What did you feel about being Ella?
- Did you feel comfortable being Chi or Brianna?
- How did you encourage each other?

Facilitator asks all students (divide into smaller groups if this would be helpful):

- How would you feel if this happened to you?
- What might have stopped the cyber-bullying?
- What do you think should happen now?

## RESOURCES



*Peer Support* has much to offer to both peer leaders and the pupils who are supported. Google YouTube and search Peer Support for videos of students talking about it. Helen Cowie and Patti Wallace, *Peer support in action* (2000, London: Sage), covers setting up Peer Support and the core skills needed.

Colin Newton and Derek Wilson provide guidelines for setting up circles of *teacher support* for responding to pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties: [www.inclusive-solutions.com/circlesofadults.asp](http://www.inclusive-solutions.com/circlesofadults.asp). Gerda Hanko's book *Increasing competence through collaborative problem-solving* (1999, London: David Fulton) also has much to offer, including illustrative case studies.

*Social and Emotional Learning*: There are many resources for SEL including the SEAL materials published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families in the UK: <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/publications/banda/seal/>

Sue Roffey's *Circle time for emotional literacy* (2006, London: Sage) has many activities for all ages addressing issues raised in this chapter.

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