Building Relationships with Students in Elementary School Grades: Adapted Strategies for Remote Classrooms

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For students in early school years, their relationships with teachers form the foundation to social-emotional development and later academic success. There are a variety of strategies that teachers can use to *promote and support positive student-teacher relationships*, such as engaging in one-to-one interactions, providing positive feedback, and establishing reasonable, high expectations.

When teachers consistently use these strategies, children are less likely to engage in challenging behaviors, and more likely to participate in the classroom and engage in learning. Thus, positive student-teacher relationships are understood as being beneficial to the child *and* the teacher. However, conditions of remote teaching have reduced opportunities for positive student-teacher interactions and created barriers to teachers' typical strategies for building quality relationships with their students.

This document was inspired by the voices of teachers participating in the Smooth Sailing* professional development program, and was designed to help teachers overcome barriers to building relationships during remote teaching. Through a review of the literature, we identified research-supported practices used to foster student-teacher relationships and student social-emotional development, and reimagined them for use in online instruction.

Notably, the presented strategies can be used within a variety of school contexts, including summer and extended school year programs. As Fall looms, many school districts expect variations of remote teaching to continue. Educators preparing for the new school year can consider building these suggestions into their virtual lesson plans and activities, though each can be feasibly implemented in traditional, in-person instruction, as well.

As each student's learning needs and their family's home circumstances differ, it is important to note that not every strategy will work as described. These strategies can and should be adapted to teachers' specific circumstances (e.g., grade and developmental level, students' access to technology, live online classes versus asynchronous online classes). In each of the six sections, we offer ways for you to connect with your students in digital classrooms and encourage you to try them. You are welcome to contact us for questions about modifications or additional support. We also hope that you will share your success stories with us.

Six Strategies for Building Meaningful Relationships with Students through a Computer Screen

1. Reach Out

Upon school closures, students experienced a rapid shift in their education. Just as it was in a traditional classroom, it is important for students to feel that their teachers are there for them and that they are supported. While it can be difficult to know *how* and *how often* to reach out to students during this unprecedented time, establishing your presence will signal to students that you are thinking of them, care for them, and are still available.

How to Reach Out. Decide on how to best communicate with your students and their parents. Consider your students' communication skills and access to materials/technology to make this decision. Because consistency is important, try to choose a communication system that will be time efficient for you so that you do not feel overburdened in your efforts to reach out.

Reaching out could be in the form of:
- A newsletter with updates
- A text message to say hello
- An email with a note of encouragement
- A video recording to inspire
- A simple phone call – especially if you have students without internet connectivity

How Often to Reach Out. While there is no rule of thumb for how often you should reach out to students during school closures, aim to do so as frequently and consistently as possible. Consider your time and resources. You may only have time to send a group text to the class to say hello twice a week, or rotate through small groups of students each day to make reaching out and staying connected more manageable.

> *Watch **THIS VIDEO**.*
> *An elementary school teacher creates and sends fun videos to his class in order to cultivate student-teacher connections during school closures.*

4

2. Have One-On-One Interactions

Virtual office hours have been implemented as a creative solution for teachers to interact with students amid school disruptions. Essentially, a few hours each day or week are reserved for teachers to speak with students and/or their parents, either by video conferencing or by phone. Students and parents are made aware of the scheduled time for office hours and the teacher's contact information. Despite this effort to connect with students remotely, many teachers are finding that drop-in time slots are not well attended.

A more worthwhile and effective strategy to building relationships is to initiate proactive outreach -- that is, to have regular, scheduled 5-minute check-ins (i.e., phone calls, video calls) with individual students. While office hours can be reserved for providing support around academic instruction and trouble-shooting learning challenges, these interactions should be used to talk about non-academic topics, for example about student interests, to prioritize listening, and to follow the student's lead.

There may be certain school- or district-level restrictions to individual conferencing with students. Teachers should be sure to check with school administrators about these policies. For instance, some schools have asked teachers not to have one-on-one virtual meetings with students unless a parent or another school staff member is present. In such situations, teachers can communicate the purpose of these interactions with parents so that they understand the potential impact they may have on their children's development. The intended schedule should also be provided so parents can plan accordingly (i.e., to be in the room during the brief designated time).

Strategies for integrating one-on-one interactions with live online classes. Teachers can create a routine, for themselves and the student, by assigning and rotating students for times before and/or after class. If using Zoom breakout rooms (or another HIPAA compliant virtual classroom solution) for small group work, teachers can hold one student in the "main room" while other students are engaged in the assignment. Once the brief one-on-one interaction is over, teachers have the ability to virtually send the student back into a breakout room with his/her peers.

*Watch **THIS VIDEO** of a kindergarten teacher at UC Riverside Early Childhood Services talk about her twice-a-day Zoom calls with individual students to provide consistency.*

3. Share Non-Academic Information

Exchanging non-academic information promotes close, positive interpersonal relationships. Creating opportunities for students to share information about themselves can help students (1) build relationships through common interests, (2) engage in online instruction, (3) feel that their voices are important, (4) practice sharing opinions, and (5) develop an awareness of others' emotions.

Share information about yourself

Teachers can start by sharing information about themselves. Topics may include hobbies, interests, favorite things, pets, etc., although teachers should elect to share as much or as little personal information as they feel comfortable. Depending on the format of your online class, this could take the form of a live video introduction in-class, a video biography, or a photo and written biography.

Ask your students to share

To make this an exchange, ask students to create and share their own introductions, whether that be live introductions, video biographies, or written/photo biographies. Video biographies can be created and shared through a variety of tools, such as Zoom and FlipGrid. Some

may require parent involvement. Student introductions can serve as a source of information for their likes and interests and to build on commonalities in lessons, readings, and activities. For example, if some students share that they enjoy gardening with their parents during school closures, teachers can consider sharing a photo or story of themselves gardening or incorporating gardening topics in their lessons.

Other ways for students to share their interests is through continued photo/written "journal" posts or by teachers sending a survey (e.g., via Google Forms, Qualtrics) with simple questions, asking about the students' favorite things, activities, or subjects. For students who have not developed reading skills, this may require their caregivers' assistance.

Create Opportunities for Students to Engage with One Another

To further build on the exchange of information, teachers can engage students with their peers. For example, teachers agree that *Show and Tell* is a great way for students to talk about their most prized possessions and beloved objects. In a remote classroom, students might share some of the arts and crafts that they have done while being at home. If this starts to feel mundane, different themes can be chosen (e.g., show and tell something red or your favorite book). This can take the form as live online show and tells, video show and tells, or photo/written show and tell posts.

For *Morning Meetings*, start by allowing each student a brief moment to individually share out to the class using one of the following sample prompts:
- "What has been your rainbow today?"
- "Share one rose and one thorn."
- "What is one fun thing you are looking forward to this week?"
- "Name one thing you're excited about."
- "What is your favorite thing to do at home?"

This whole-class activity can be completed in about 5-minutes, particularly if teachers closely monitor timing and students become familiar with the routine and are prepared to share.

Tips to Consider

- Teachers should answer the prompt first to model how students should share.
- Ensure a safe, supportive environment where students feel comfortable to share. Teachers should respond individually with a brief positive comment or specific praise.
- For enrichment, comment on observed common interests (i.e., between peers and with yourself).
- To ensure that the activity goes smoothly, explain the activity in advance. If this is the first time the activity is being introduced, teachers may want to use a live or recorded video to provide instructions.
- Remind students of the activity and instructions the day before and ask them to prepare (e.g., write, draw or think about the prompt; put aside the item they want to share). You can also give students a minute to think or write before sharing aloud. This will be particularly helpful for students who need more time to think about their answers, or who become anxious when called upon.
- Over time, students can be given the opportunity to pick the topic/prompt.
- If students are absent from class that day, offer another way to engage in this community-building activity, for example by allowing them to send a video or a photo of what they would have shared.

4. Celebrate Successes

Celebrating student successes and growth can be an effective motivator and can help create a positive classroom environment, even virtually. Below are a few simple, morale-boosting, uplifting ways to celebrate success.

Celebrate a special event, such as the end of the semester or academic year, by hosting a **virtual award ceremony**. Student awards should be individualized, sincere, and positive – for example, "Caring Classmate", "Ray of Sunshine", "Remarkable Leader", "Kid of Character". Awards can be easily created with Powerpoint or Google Slides (or purchased through Teachers Pay Teachers) and given out in synchronous remote classrooms. They can also be emailed to parents to involve them in recognizing their children's strengths.

Celebrating student success does not always have to occur in a group setting. It might involve sending messages (via text, email, videos, etc.) to individual students or providing positive feedback in one-on-one meetings, praising them for their hard work and engagement with learning. showing that you notice and appreciate their unique strengths and efforts.

During school closures, student success may not be as obvious or measurable as it is during traditional schooling. If teachers are unsure, one solution may be to **ask the student** (e.g. "Which class activities have you enjoyed?), in order to better understand their interests, preferences, and achievements.

In addition, ask what has been most challenging or confusing, and offer to work through the problem together. Student-teacher problem-solving may lead to meaningful, favorable experiences to celebrate. It may also be beneficial to provide a platform for students to express their opinions and feedback.

Parents can also be a great source of information about the student. If possible, **ask parents** what positive experiences their children have recently had or what have they enjoyed doing at home.

5. Promote Peer Interactions

During social distancing and school closures, it is crucial to build connected, caring communities for students through remote classrooms. The extent to which response and reassurance is provided that teachers and peers are there for them will go a long way in establishing relationships and building a sense of trust.

During remote instruction, dedicating a period of class time for peer interactions and "fun" group work can be feasibly executed to accomplish this goal. For example, *Zoom* has a breakout room feature where peers can work with one another in small groups. Also consider beginning each class with a **Compliment Circle***:* Ask for a volunteer to start the circle. The student selects a peer to compliment by saying their name and giving the compliment. The peer acknowledges the compliment by saying, "Thank you!" Traditionally, once students receive a compliment, a clear visual cue signals who still needs to be complimented (e.g., changing positions to sit crossed-legged). Online, this might instead be raising or lowering a hand. When students provide a compliment appropriately, teachers should provide specific praise or provide points, as you might in the classroom for appropriate behavior, engagement, and appropriate responding. *Class Dojo* and other online tools provide options to implement points in the remote classrooms.

Teachers can also supervise class "get-togethers" to play a game, watch a show/movie, or have a book club. Such semi-structured social activities can nurture social communication skills and benefit students who have limited social opportunities during school closures. *All* students in the class should be invited to participate in class get-togethers to promote inclusion. This will also be immensely helpful to your students' parents who have had to come up with various ways to fill the day with meaningful activities during the pandemic.

Some fun activities for remote classrooms are listed on the next page. Each varies in terms of needed materials and set up requirements. They are displayed by least to most needs/requirements. For all of these, teachers can decide how long they want the activity to last.

ACTIVITY	HOW IT WORKS
Name that Tune	Students submit a few of their favorite songs to the teacher in advance, or teachers can make a playlist of songs that students will likely know. The teacher then plays a song for the class, and students raise their hands to name the title as quickly as they can.
Play Online Games	To play *Word Charades*, follow these steps: 1. Go to the Word Charades website by clicking **this** link 2. Select "Pantoparty Easy Mode for Kids" 3. If more than 2 groups will be needed, click "Add Teams" 4. Type in team names, or proceed with the default labels 5. Click "Play" On behalf of the first student, draw a card with 5 random words on it. You can share your screen with that individual student, or privately send the words to him/her. It is the student's job to then act them out. Other students have to guess while a 3-minute timer runs. Once a word is correctly guessed, click on the word. A check mark will appear next to the word, and the team gets a point (1 point per correct guess). The game is played for 5 rounds. The team that gets the most points wins! *Currently, several online classroom games are available for use. See additional options here.*
Play a Scavenger Hunt	Students are given or shown a prompt (e.g., find something furry, find something cozy, find something you can read). Indicate the amount of time students have to find the object, keeping it to a short duration (e.g., 30 seconds). Show a timer (or set up a fun virtual timer). The first student back wins a point! *NOTE: Parents should be notified about the activity ahead of time.*
Host a Netflix Party	To watch a Netflix movie or show with the entire class and chat with one another while watching, follow these steps: 1. Install the Chrome Extension by clicking "Install Netflix Party" on this page. Once redirected to the Chrome Web Store, click "Add to Chrome" to finish installing. 2. Go to Netflix's home site and play your movie or show. 3. Click on the red "NP" icon, located next to the address bar. Then click "Start Party" to get the party started, and share the party URL with your students. To join a party, students will need to log in to their separate Netflix accounts. Students should click on the URL link. Once redirected to the page, click on the "NP" icon on the address bar. The Netflix Party will automatically appear and the class will be simultaneously watching the same content. On the side of the screen, Netflix Party has a chat function, allowing all to chat and react in real time. Teachers can pause the movie or show at any time, and use the chat function to ask specific questions. *NOTE: All participants (the teacher and all students) need to have a Netflix account. Parent involvement may be needed for setup.*

5. Promote Peer Interactions *(cont.)*

Having high expectations for student participation may be impractical during school closures. However, students may be more likely to participate if clear, explicit instructions are provided and routines are established. Talk about and explain *how* students can participate, ask questions, or respond to peers (e.g., "raise hand" chat feature on Zoom versus actually raising a hand; teacher in charge of unmuting versus students in charge of unmuting).

One way to provide clear instructions for student is through recorded how-to videos. When teachers create these videos, it accomplishes two things: First, the video content will help develop a quasi-relationship with the teacher, as the students will be seeing and hearing the face and voice of the teacher present these instructions rather than simply reading text. Also, they will have a greater opportunity to absorb the instructions through this audio-video format than through text alone. For live classes, teachers should model how to use different aspects of the platform and how to participate (e.g., through "screen sharing" features).

6. Model Effective Coping Strategies

Students learn essential coping skills during early school years, often from their teachers. Educators regularly teach effective coping skills in the classroom – whether through class-wide instruction, individual lessons, or by modeling appropriate coping behaviors. On a fundamental level, teachers model effective coping by actively listening to students and using a calm tone even when overwhelmed or frustrated. Now more than ever, our young students are experiencing major changes and stressors and will benefit from the teaching of these skills. Relaxation and emotion regulation techniques, such as yoga, mindfulness, and belly breathing, can help students cope with heightened emotions during school closures.

There are a variety of available step-by-step breathing exercises to use.

A simple version:

1. Take a deep breath in through your nose and count to 3.
2. Exhale slowly through your mouth to the count of 3.
3. Put your hand on your belly and feel your belly rise and fall as you breathe.

Steps 1 through 3 should be repeated several times. Calming music may be played during the exercise.

After the breathing practice, use this opportunity to ask students how they feel, as students may be experiencing complex emotions during the pandemic. If time is limited for exploration, students can show a thumbs up or thumbs down to express their emotions.

If students show a thumbs down, another few minutes of practice could be beneficial. If a thumbs-down response is consistently shown or it seems like more than just a "bad day", it may signal to teachers that a check-in with the student and/or their parents is needed, or that a school counselor should be informed to provide additional support.

Resources

In remote classrooms, teachers can use yoga by streaming a child-friendly video for guided mindful breathing and yoga, such as ones created by [Cosmic Kids Yoga](#) or [Mind Yeti](#). [Wide Open Schools](#) also provides movement videos that are specifically designed for elementary school teachers and are feasible to use under remote instruction conditions.

Videos are a wonderful resource, but teachers can also screen share child-friendly [pictures of yoga poses](#) and provide verbal instructions. When these exercises are teacher facilitated (rather than directed by someone else), students have more opportunities to connect with their teachers.

Additional resources for teachers include a [Coping Skills Toolbox](#), which is a comprehensive document of stress reduction worksheets and ideas, and [Smiling Mind](#), a free mindfulness and meditation app created by educators and psychologists with mindfulness material tailored for the classroom context.

With any of these resources, here are a few **things to consider:**

- Adapt resources to suit your needs and the needs of your students
- Try not to focus on perfecting the technique, but rather make sure students are having *fun* with the movement. Students will more likely use these strategies across other settings if they enjoy doing them.
- Create safe, meaningful experiences for your students

In addition to helping students learn effective coping strategies, these relaxation techniques can be a great tool to increase student attention. Thus, to help focus on remote instruction, teachers may want to routinely start each day with a facilitated deep breathing or yoga exercise. These exercises can also be used throughout the day as breaks, or at the end of the day so that students "leave" class feeling relaxed. Notably, by incorporating these practices throughout the school day, teachers may also experience improved mental health themselves.

In Closing

Classroom relationships can continue to be improved and maintained under remote teaching contexts. Emails, phone calls, text messaging, and online tools can help teachers stay connected with students. To increase opportunities for student-teacher interactions, both open-door sessions and outreach efforts can be utilized. Develop a schedule or routine that includes the suggested strategies in this guide to help you stay organized and to provide consistency for students, which may help support vulnerable students or those with high needs the most. Collaborate with parents to ensure that your efforts are constructive and to nurture a sense of community for their children.

Above all else, remember that building relationships with students requires showing that you care about them, not only as learners but also as individuals. More specifically, showing that you care means providing: *warmth and acceptance*; *empathy towards unique feelings and experiences*; and *time to be present with students.*

Looking for additional online platforms and tools?

Here are some frequently suggested online resources for remote teaching. Most of these require users to create an account; many are free.

REMOTE TEACHING PLATFORMS	*ONLINE SURVEY TOOLS*
Edmondo, Flipgrid, ClassDojo, Padlet, or Google Classroom	Google Forms, Kahoot, Quizlet, Qualtrics, or Zoom (polling function)
TOOLS TO CREATE NEWSLETTERS	*GROUP TEXT MESSAGING TOOLS*
Canva	Classpager, Remind, or ClassParrot
TOOLS FOR CREATING RECORDINGS	
Flipgrid, Loom or Screencast-o-Matic (for screen and video recording); AdobeConnect or Zoom (for video-conferencing with a record function)	

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