

Building a Sense of Family in the Classroom

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A DECADE AGO, Paul Barton, then with the Educational Testing Service, estimated that about 90 percent of the differences in students' academic performance "could be explained by" five factors in the home life of students: number of days absent from school, number of hours spent watching television, number of pages read for homework, quantity and quality of reading material in the home, and whether one or two parents are present in the home.¹

We would agree that the absence of a stable family environment is a very significant and direct contributor to the problems faced daily by teachers. Certainly, numerous variations of single parent, stepparent, grandparent and other family arrangements have demonstrated that the traditional "nuclear" family is not a prerequisite to healthy and "normal" child development. Social and emotional health and academic success become more problematic if a child is living in an environment where there is no stable significant other, where there is constant change of guardianship, and most importantly, where there is a lack of love and genuine concern for the child.

With this in mind, we believe that an effective and important step that teachers can take to reach children from such backgrounds, not to mention all other children, is to develop a sense of family in the classroom. We have identified activities that elementary and middle school teachers can adopt to promote an environment of caring and trust. It is not necessary for teachers to implement all the suggested activities, or to pretend that they can be all things to all students, but a combination of several of these activities can, we believe, can make a significant difference in students' attitudes towards school,

motivation to learn, and overall happiness. We suggest, in the notes, further reading on the more complex activities. These activities can be roughly categorized as to whether they focus on the individual student, a pair of students, the whole class (or two classes), the classroom environment, or the teacher him or herself.

Individual Students

Acknowledging Birthdays

Birthdays are extra special to children, and teachers can make each student feel special on his or her day. Birthday students could be allowed to share special things with the class, show baby pictures, have their parents come to school, wear a special hat, take the class pet home for the night, and maybe have lunch with the teacher—things that would let them feel happy and important. Also, try to accommodate all the children with "summer" birthdays with a celebration at the end of the school year for them.

Good Citizen Award

One way to encourage helpful and friendly behavior is to have a regular award given to the student each week/month that best represents such behavior. It puts a premium on getting along with others. The student could receive a small plastic trophy to keep for the week/month or could be given a certificate.

Random Act of Kindness Award

Each week or month, the teacher can watch for and identify a kind action done by one of the children for someone else. Their picture could be taken and posted in the classroom, or out in the hall, in a special place reserved for the winner. A brief description of what the student did could accompany it. Priority could be given for soothing hurt feelings, helping someone who is having difficulty with a task, or making space for someone left out of a

playground game.

Personal Best

Parents and teachers err if they constantly compare children to each other. In so doing, the blessing of having a sibling can be transformed into resentment. The same thing can occur in the classroom, and it should be avoided. It is far better to ask a child to attend to his or her earlier performance. Letting a child know that he or she has surpassed a "personal best" can motivate him or her just as well as comparison with another student (and it does not have the serious negative side effects).

Journals about Feelings

It is hard for teachers to know everything that is going on in the lives of their students. Having the children keep journals about how they feel can be a great way to stay informed. Happy children learn best. Of course, it is impossible to control their home life, but finding out about dramatic changes or traumatic events in their lives allows the teacher to respond. A sensitive and caring teacher can do many things to help a child's day go easier when there is unusual stress at home. Also, pause to find out about events on the school bus, in the cafeteria, or on the playground that have upset children. Teachers can not be in all places at all times, but reading student journals regularly (with the students' permission) can help enormously in staying on top of important issues in their lives.

Parent and Grandparent Participation

A great way to encourage the sense of family is to involve real family members of the children. A child with a single working parent may nevertheless have a grandparent also involved in his or her life. There are many ways that parents and grandparents can play roles in the classroom. They can read stories to the children, participate in

tutoring, assist at lunch in opening containers, or just eat with the class. If they have a job that would be interesting to the children, they could tell them about what they do.²

Diads

Homework Buddies

When students begin to fall behind, the stress and disappointment can quickly undermine their sense of belonging. Performing at a similar level to the other students is a great source of confidence and encouragement. For students who need help, homework buddies can aid tremendously.³ The teacher can ask for volunteers. Usually, several students are interested and willing to function in such a role. Matches can be made in terms of strengths and needs, as well as personalities. Phone numbers can be shared. Struggling students will have someone to whom they can ask questions, and from whom they can get guidance.

Peer Tutors

Using peer tutors is a technique employed by teachers all over the United States. Suitable students are identified, and if they are willing, can serve to help one or more other children in the class. It is also common to use students who are in upper grades to visit the class on a regular basis for the purpose of giving assistance to those needing it. In many school districts, they can earn service-learning credit hours for doing so. Cross age tutoring has the added benefit that the younger children tend to look up to older students and respond eagerly.

Buddies for New Students

When students are new to a school and have no familiar friends, the first few days can be a threatening and lonely experience. This is especially true for students who move from other states, or from out of the country. Everything is new for them. A buddy can show them the ropes, eat with them at lunch, include them in activities on the playground, call them at night, explain homework, and other things to make them feel at home. It also models kindness and thoughtfulness for all the

others. The teacher can also ask the class for ways the group can help to make the new student feel welcome.

Peer Mediation

An exciting development in schools in the United States in recent years is the increasing use of peer mediators in resolving conflicts between children.⁴ Students respond to what peers think, and they listen carefully to their suggestions for peaceful resolution of disagreements. If the teacher can identify several children who are respected by the others, who have the maturity to listen, clarify issues and suggest practical solutions, the strategy has a good chance of success. The teacher would provide limited training in those skills, and oversee the mediation process. Care must be taken not to assign a student to a mediator who is too closely affiliated with either of the children involved in a disagreement. Everyone should understand that failure of the mediation process results in the teacher deciding what must be done. It could be implied that the teacher's solution may be more severe, thus putting pressure on the students to resolve the situation by themselves.⁵

Large Groups or Whole Class

Cooperative All-Class Goals

In many classes, competition is used as a main form of motivation.⁶ For example, the teacher keeps a chart on the wall, with stars next to the names of students who have received a perfect score (100%) on their spelling quizzes. While it is natural and healthy to have some competition in classrooms, individual competition does not nurture a sense of group or family. If, however, the teacher challenges the class as a whole to attain a certain level of spelling proficiency, and promises a surprise for success, the students can be motivated to pull together and help each other achieve. For example, study partners can help each other raise their "personal best" scores in various areas.

Interclass Competition

Children can be naturally competitive, and when one class is challenged to compete against another class, they tend to pull together and encourage each other. This can be a great way to build class spirit and a sense of togetherness. The subject of the competition can be anything from attendance, spelling scores, or the neatness of the room. Elementary teachers who use this technique will often use a target goal that is somewhat subjective so that the classes can "tie," thereby avoiding the discouragement of losing for either class.

Password, Handshake, and T-shirt

Children enjoy feeling special, and this commonly happens when they have or know something that others do not. A class password (for example) would be something that only they would know. The students in other classes would not be privy to it. The same thing would be true of a class handshake. In addition, a special t-shirt could be designed and created for the class. Involvement of the students in the process would help enhance the group spirit associated with the shirt. It could be worn on special days or on field trips.

Open Forum on Problems, Behaviors, and Feelings

Many of the children in today's society have no one with whom they can talk about important issues in their lives. Their parents are either too busy or uninterested. The children are thus set adrift, with only the guidance of their peers, who are also confused and unguided. One of the most important things that teachers can do is to find time in busy schedules to occasionally have class discussions on topics that are very much on the minds of their children. It can help everyone to participate in an open discussion on bullying, the possible victims as well as those inclined to bully. Hearing how their classmates feel about it can make a deep impression.

Diversity Activities

In recent years, ethnic diversity has received a great deal of attention and does not need to be discussed in depth here. However, in developing a sense of family, one key ingredient is that everyone feels that he or

she belongs.⁷ The diverse characteristics, different experiences, and multiple abilities of the students should be explicitly valued. There are many activities available for this purpose that should be an integral part of every class curriculum.

“Put-Down” Patrol

Teasing can be a cruel and destructive behavior and can quickly undermine the feelings that are hoped for in a family like setting. Teachers must aggressively identify and discipline teasing. One of the techniques that can be effective in the younger grades is the “put-down patrol.” All classmates are charged with the duty of watching out for such unkind behavior and telling those engaged in it to stop. No “put downs” are allowed. When the group acts in this way and is reinforced for doing so by the teacher, it can go a long way in controlling teasing.

Get Well Cards and Videos

When children are sick and miss extended periods of school, it can be really effective for teachers to get the class involved in making a “feel better video” or a large get well card to sent to them. The video can include jokes told by different students, songs sung by the class, etc. The card can be done on poster-board with encouraging messages written to the absent child by everyone in the class. The message for all involved in this activity is that everyone is important and that you are missed when you can’t attend.

Applause

Occasionally, when someone does something that is noteworthy and deserves attention, the teacher might have the class give the student a round of applause. This can be highly reinforcing to the recipient and strengthens the desirable behavior. It also enhances the sense of community and team spirit. Everyone is pulling for everyone else. The teacher should keep track of who has received applause, making sure that this form of attention is spread around the class evenly. Otherwise, children left out may believe that the teacher does not like them.

Books about Families

There are many good books about families that model some of the things that families do and the healthy feelings that family members hold toward each other. Having a regular “story time” can be a marvelous activity not just for elementary students, but also in a middle school, where students can help read aloud. Reading stories about families can reinforce efforts in the classroom to get the students to interact with each other in friendly and constructive ways. And all it takes is a good read-aloud book.⁸

The Classroom Environment

A Homey Touch

The physical setup of a classroom can have a big effect on the feelings that the children have towards being there.⁹ For example, an old couch and an over-stuffed chair in the back of the room serves as a spot where students can sit during free time, small group work or after they have finished their assignment. The area could be called “cloud nine.” A teacher might get an old cast iron bathtub (or a cardboard box from a washer or dryer), decorate it, fill it with soft pillows, and call it the “reading tub” or the “think tub.” Students who finish class work can sign up to read or do brain teasers while ensconced inside.

Bully Box

Bullying is a serious problem that is gaining increased attention from educators. In addition to taking a hard line in prohibiting it and watching out for signs of it, a teacher can set up a “bully box.” Anyone can use it anonymously to report that they saw any bullying, writing down when, where, the name of the victim and name of the bully.¹⁰ Of course some of these “reports” may be bogus, but there may also be accurate accounts that can assist the teacher in investigating and stopping it immediately. Discrete, personal interviews with individual students often clarify what has (or has not) gone on. Surveys could also be used to find out if and with whom there might be problems. When children inclined to bully realize that they will likely be identified, they may think twice about doing it. We owe a safe and

protected environment to all students, and in such a setting they learn best.

Compliment Box

Likewise, a teacher can set up a box for good news. Anyone could put an anonymous compliment in it about anybody else. On Fridays, the teacher could open the box and read some of the compliments. Of course some would be inappropriate (and would be skipped by the teacher), but the genuine ones would have a very beneficial effect. The teacher could place compliments in the box too, and could thereby include children who might be overlooked by their peers. Hearing a compliment about themselves, even if it was just concerning “outward appearances,” can have a wonderful effect on them. In their minds, it could have been placed there by anyone in the class. Realizing this could result in the child’s feeling more accepted and more positive about school.

Student-Decorated Classroom

Allowing students to play a major role in the decoration of their classroom can enhance a feeling of ownership and togetherness. Children often have very good ideas. Of course other ideas are impossible or inappropriate, but with teacher guidance, and occasionally modification of student-generated ideas, the room can take on a character that is attractive and inviting to the students. They can also participate by doing the artwork required.

Picture Album

A great item to have in the classroom is a camera. The teacher can take the pictures or allow students to take turns as the “class photographer.” Different class activities can be documented, from small group work to playground fun or fieldtrips. Students love to point themselves out in mounted group pictures. Keeping a classroom version of a family album is a wonderful way to enhance the feeling of belonging. A special effort, however, must be made to ensure that all the students are included in the pictures. In fact, teachers can make a special effort to take flattering pictures of especially shy children or others who may not be getting attention from their peers

for whatever reason.

Hygiene Supplies

In many communities today, it is not uncommon for teachers to have students in the class who come to school without regular baths or clean clothes. Such unkempt children are often offensive and are sometimes shunned or isolated. They are also teased about it. When parents are confronted with these issues, they are usually offended and typically unhelpful. The teacher could teach a lesson on personal hygiene (with handouts for parents), thus conveying the appropriate message to the child, without offence. A gentle conversation with the child, away from other children, may also be beneficial. If the teacher has hygienic supplies at the school, such children can be encouraged to use them each morning, washing their face and underarms, brushing their teeth, and combing their hair. It is a touchy issue, but failure to address it can result in destructive isolation.

Class Pet

Many teachers of elementary and middle schools have class pets, and it is a wonderful idea as long as the children are supervised in their interactions with the animal. Some children play too roughly with small animals, and others can be cruel. The teacher must model appropriate ways of playing with the pet and emphasize its kind and gentle treatment before allowing any child to touch it. The students will grow close with their class pet and look forward to seeing it after the weekend and holidays. This is a great learning opportunity for the children and one more way to make the class feel unique and special.

The Teacher

Warnings and Consequences

To establish a warm family environment, an important element is the absence of yelling and unkind comments by the teacher. Teachers are human, and it is easy when stressed to say things to children that hurt their feelings or make them feel uncomfortable. The effectiveness of a warning is not based on how loudly or curtly it is given, but on whether or not the warning is followed by the promised (reasonable yet aversive) consequence.¹¹ We advocate that teachers give business-like warnings, which are short but clear. New teachers are sometimes advised not to smile until winter break. This is unfortunate and leads to classrooms that are tense and unpleasant. Consistency and follow-through are the basis of good discipline, not unfriendly or aloof teacher behavior.

Teacher's Personal Stories

Young children can have funny ideas about their teachers. It is not uncommon for them to believe that their teacher eats and sleeps in the school building. When they occasionally spot their teacher at the grocery they are always baffled and excited to discover that they eat the same cereal or cookies. Having a teacher who tells stories about his or her childhood, or who shares an old class picture from his or her own elementary and middle school grades, can fascinate children and give them a more natural understanding of the person who is their teacher.¹² A short anecdote about a funny incident with a childhood pet, a dramatic moment on a sport team, or a family vacation misadventure can have a bonding effect between students and teacher. Teachers cannot take the place of parents, but we can be part of the social and emotional network (as well as the

academic home base) that supports and nurtures these young people. ☞

Notes

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