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CHAPTER

1

**Building Relationships  
from Day One**

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It was the first Friday of the first week of my first year as a teacher and I (John) was determined to have students engage in a hands-on learning activity. My students were going to solidify their understanding of the five themes of geography by creating collages that represent each of them. I had spent weeks asking friends and family for old magazines. I hit up every back-to-school sale, and purchased an absurd amount of glue and cardstock and tempera paints.

I showed up two hours early to set out the supplies. I photocopied the detailed instructions that I had reworked over and over again. I stopped for a moment to daydream about what this would look like someday when they made a teacher movie about my story. The students would fall in love with social studies through hands-on learning. They would discover the joy of geography and learn that history wasn't something in the past; it was alive in the present.

*This was going to be epic.*

The first week was a success up to this point. I knew almost every student's name. I talked about sports and video games and music with the students who gathered by my door before class. We were becoming a community, and today I would take it to the next level with a hands-on learning experience. My stomach turned with that mix of excitement and anxiety as I stared at the clock waiting for the morning bell to ring.

As the students streamed in, I could sense their confusion. No warm-up? No bell work? What's with all the paints and magazines?

"Today is going to be different," I told them. I launched into an excited pitch for our mini-project and ended with a quick reminder about classroom rules and consequences. Then, I let them loose.

My first two classes finished early, which meant most students wandered around talking while I frantically looked for places for the paint to dry. In between class periods, I fought back a lingering sense of disappointment. This wasn't epic. It was a collage. It wasn't the stuff of the silver screen super-teachers. It was a craft. But still, students were generally engaged and that was a success for a Friday. I tempered my expectations a bit, but still hoped that one of my classes would live up to my hopes for this project.

In my third class period, a group of students decided to smear paint on their faces. Right after sending them to the restroom, I heard a loud crash and the shattering of glass. I spun around to see a girl crying as she pulled broken shards from her hair.

“Who did this?” I growled.

The class remained silent.

“Just own up to it! Who did this?” I screamed. I know in teacher circles we often say, “I lost my voice” as code for yelling, but this was screaming. I was red in the face. And once I calmed down, I made every student write down who did it. One name emerged over and over again—Jose.

I wasn’t surprised. Teachers had warned me about Jose before school began. So, I wrote the referral and sent him to the office. During lunch, I stopped by the office and Jose insisted that he hadn’t done anything wrong.

“I don’t want to hear it. There are witnesses,” I responded.

But as I headed back to my class, a quiet girl pulled me aside and said, “Mr. Spencer, I need to tell you something.” Tears were streaming down her face.

“Maria, what’s wrong? Did something happen to you?”

“It was me. I knocked down the picture. I was trying to toss glue to a friend and it accidentally hit the picture. It wasn’t Jose.”

She walked with me to the office and I apologized to Jose and his mother, embarrassed by how I handled this situation. This moment shaped the way I thought about discipline forever.

## **Five Truths about Building Effective Relationships**

I share this story as a disclaimer that I don’t have this all figured out. Trevor and I both have cringe-worthy moments when we raised our voices at our classes (code word for yelled) or accidentally shamed them or simply didn’t know how to get a loud and rowdy group to settle down.

In teachers college, we both read books that promised we would have “no classroom management issues” if we followed the directions laid out in the pages. We wrote essays in college describing how we’d incorporate these directions in

our classroom management plan, modeled these methods in front of our professors and other preservice teachers, and memorized the directions as if they were answers on a test.

And then we started teaching and followed the directions to a tee, and quite often, they simply didn't work. At first, we thought it was us. Maybe we weren't consistent enough. Perhaps we hadn't mastered the right techniques. We wondered if we simply weren't talented enough as teachers.

Eventually, we realized, through our own unique journeys, that there is no instruction manual for classroom management. We are all messy humans in a messy world. Our classrooms will always have tension and conflict and challenges. It's the nature of working with people. That's what makes it hard, but it's also what makes it beautiful.

We came into teaching with a traditional mindset toward classroom management. We had a system of punishments and rewards, and expected every student to follow the rules we set up. We thought if we had clear rules and logical consequences for misbehavior, our classrooms would run smoothly.

And I'm not going to lie, sometimes it worked. Sometimes class was smooth and students did follow our instructions. But then inevitable conflict would arise. A student would have an outburst. There was a fight in the hallway right before class. Some students didn't follow our rules. There was a full moon. (If that doesn't make sense now, teach for a while and you'll get it.)

Or we'd lose our temper on a kid who turned out to be innocent.

And it became apparent that simply having rules, rewards, and penalties was not sufficient. All of the rules and procedures in the world could not negate the fact that teaching is inherently messy. This realization began our journeys to discover a better way to manage our classrooms.

We now view classroom management through a different, and perhaps, more realistic lens: that teaching is relational. Like all relationships, there's no instruction manual or map to guide you down the perfect path.

*Relationships are messy.*

So, instead of offering an instruction manual, we'd like to share some counterintuitive truths about classroom management that we have seen in our own classrooms.

### Truth #1: There's Strength in Humility

Jose didn't even look up when I apologized to him. The principal attempted to get him to acknowledge me, but he turned away and stared at the wall. He had every right to be angry. I hadn't simply made a mistake. I made a snap judgment based on a child's reputation. In my own fear and insecurity, I lashed out at that class and failed to listen to Jose's side of the story.

The next day, I apologized again. Jose's response was, "That's okay. I'm used to this."

"It's not okay and I don't want you to get used to this. I am genuinely sorry," I answered.

For the next week, Jose looked away and avoided eye contact. But subtly something changed. He answered a question. He joined his group discussion. He turned in an assignment. Then, to my surprise, when I invited him to join the cross-country team, he asked if he could call his mom and see if his aunt could babysit his younger sister so he could come to try-outs.

Over the course of the year, Jose emerged as a leader in my class. There were still moments when I gently redirected him and a few times when he got into fights at lunch time or in physical education (PE) class. However, he also thrived in small group settings where he was natural project manager. One day, a teacher across the breezeway dropped a beaker and the glass shattered. He looked up at me and said, "Hey, Mr. Spencer, I swear that wasn't me. No matter how many people write my name on a paper."

While I still cringe at the way I judged Jose, he was able to turn the incident into an inside joke because he had truly forgiven me. This was a reminder that there's strength in humility. I remember being worried that apologizing might be seen as a sign of weakness to students. Would they simply walk all over me afterward? But in my experience, students typically respond with kindness. They view an apology as a sign of strength. This humility is ultimately what allows teachers and students to restore their relationships.

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*There's strength in  
humility.*



## Truth #2: Classroom Management Is Deeply Relational

Often new teachers are told, “Don’t take student behavior personally.” It’s not you; it’s them. If a student is talking while you’re talking, they might simply want to chat with a neighbor. When a student comes in grumpy and snaps at you, it’s often connected to something on the playground or the lunch room.

While it’s true that we shouldn’t *take* behavior personally, classroom management *is* personal because it connects to relationships. The incident with Jose wasn’t merely a discipline issue. It was a relational one. One student felt that she couldn’t get up and move in my classroom and she was afraid to ask. She threw paint across the room out of a fear of breaking the rules. A group of students blamed one particular student for breaking a picture frame because he had always been labeled as the troublemaker. I lashed out at the entire class and blamed one specific student. These moments were all deeply relational. I had hurt my students by getting angry, shaming a student, and failing to listen. I wasn’t even sure how I would fix things.

Moving forward, my goal was to restore the relationship with my students and to improve their relationships with one another. One of the most effective methods of cultivating positive classroom relationships is using the Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR) process (see Figure 1.1).



**FIGURE 1.1** The EMR method.

Source: Cook, C. R., Coco, S., Zhang, Y., Fiat, A. E., Duong, M. T., Renshaw, T. L., Long, A. C., & Frank, S. (2018). Cultivating positive teacher–student relationships: Preliminary evaluation of the establish–maintain–restore (EMR) method. APA PsycNet. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-47899-002> with “Adapted from Cook et.al. 2018. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-47899-002>.”

This starts with teachers establishing positive relationships with students, maintaining them throughout the year, and after inevitable conflict (because teaching is messy), restoring the relationship with students.

In *Cultivating Positive Teacher-Student Relationships*, researchers conducted a blind study with fourth- and fifth-grade teachers to analyze the connection between student-teacher relationships and positive behavior.<sup>1</sup> They found that teachers who used the Establish-Maintain-Restore process in their classrooms saw “significant improvement in student outcomes” and a sharp drop in disruptive behavior. Another group studied the effect Establish-Maintain-Restore has on student outcomes, including “improvements in academic achievement and engagement and reductions in disruptive behaviors, suspension, and risk of dropping out.”<sup>2</sup> Universally, programs that use EMR saw the largest effects on overall student outcomes.

This makes sense. Students who feel invested in, trusted, and respected by their teachers have a different posture toward being in class. The point of student-teacher relationships is not to *just* be kind and friendly to students, it’s the bedrock for classroom management. When their attitudes are oriented in this way, more time and energy is devoted to academics and less to managing and correcting negative behavior.

### Truth #3: There Are No Good or Bad Students

I (Trevor) once had a student in my class named Dave who I initially perceived as being lazy, and maybe even a little rude. He never raised his hand to speak in class, avoided eye contact when I spoke to him, turned in less than half of his assignments, and I constantly caught him watching YouTube videos on his laptop when he was supposed to be working. I exercised so much patience with Dave, and yet he would still just shrug his shoulders when I asked him why he wasn’t working. It was only a couple of weeks into the school year when I filed a place for Dave in my mind on the “bad kid” list. Of course, I didn’t think he was purely bad, but if I’m being honest, he was easy to classify as difficult and possibly unreachable.

After a couple of months of this, I’d had enough and decided to call home to let his parents know. A woman answered who I thought to be Dave’s mother, and I said to her, “I’m Dave’s teacher, and I’m really struggling to get Dave to participate in class and was hoping you could give me some suggestions.”

She replied, “Hi Mr. Muir, I’m not Dave’s mother, I’m his foster mom. And we’ve been having the same issues since he’s been with us. I’ve actually been meaning to call you hoping you could give me some advice.”

*Oh, I didn’t know Dave was in foster care.*

Dave’s foster mom proceeded to share with me that Dave holds the record at his social work agency for being in the most homes in the shortest amount of time. She told me a little bit about why he was in foster care and some of the horrible things that were done to him and how this has all had a deep impact on the way he interacts with adults, especially men.

This was heartbreaking. I had no idea that Dave wasn’t lazy; he was angry, sad, and hurt. I ended that call without any specific answers as to how to get Dave to engage in my class. However, I gained a deep empathy for the student whom I had improperly labeled.

And when I remember this, I can see that a “bad kid” is often someone in pain. At the same time, I am not surprised when a “good kid” does something bad. Behavior is communication. Sometimes a lazy student is really an insecure student. Sometimes a tired student is really a hungry one. Sometimes a rude, misbehaving student is really an insecure one, and would rather get in trouble than fail at their task. Sometimes a student who says hurtful things to their teacher is actually hurting themselves, and the words they sling are really a reaction to their own pain.

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*Behavior is  
communication.*



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A student’s life experience does not excuse poor behavior or make it any less distracting/hurtful, but it does explain it. And one of the most challenging, yet important roles of an educator, is to recognize the fact that students are communicating through their actions and to react accordingly. The reality is, every single behavior in school has an explanation.

This might seem theoretical, but this mindset can help us think differently about discipline. First, it means you are open to the idea that you might not know the whole story. It never hurts to delay judgment and gather facts slowly before choosing a course of action with discipline. In addition, it means you are willing to work with challenging students because you know they are capable of growth. Finally, it’s a daily reminder that you will hold all students to a high standard of behavior while also recognizing that students are going to mess up along the way.

### Truth #4: Classroom Management Is a Learning Opportunity

The traditional, behaviorist view of classroom management holds that students behave based on a system of punishments and rewards. If teachers use the right reinforcements with students, they can maximize ideal behavior while limiting challenging behaviors. We see this approach with schoolwide discipline initiatives like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and through token rewards systems.

But ultimately, what is the goal of classroom management? You might want to see students learn self-regulation and impulse control. Perhaps you want students to learn how to navigate conflict and solve interpersonal issues. Maybe you're hoping for personal integrity and honesty. Chances are, it's a combination of factors that can be summed up with the idea of "doing the right thing because it's the right thing to do." In other words, we want students to do the right thing, not for a prize, but because of an intrinsic motivation.

This is why it helps to treat discipline issues as learning opportunities. We'll take a deeper dive into this topic in the next chapter, but the big idea is that we can treat discipline issues as opportunities for students to self-reflect, set goals, and grow. Like PBIS and other rewards systems, this growth equates to better behavior, but now the motivation is students developing elemental transformation rather than following a carrot on a stick. We might still need to provide consequences and incentives, but we can approach these interactions with the question, "What do I want this student to learn from this experience?"

### Practical Ideas: Getting to Know Students

As a new teacher, I (Trevor) had my students write "I'm From" poems, an activity where students share their life stories in poetry. For some students, this was a fun way to share about their home-lives and contexts. However, many kids would skip this assignment, and it was often because this activity wasn't trauma-informed. Not every student feels safe sharing their story. While vulnerability has a place in the classroom, it can take months to develop trust as a community, and students should have a sense of control over how much they are sharing. I needed to shift get-to-know-you activities from personal experiences to geeky interests. Starting with

student interests can help build student confidence by sending the message that we are all experts in something. This creates a culture where students are able to learn from one another from day one.

When getting to know your students, perhaps start with impersonal activities, like scavenger hunts, escape rooms, or trivia games. Then begin to move to more personal activities, like interest surveys, show-and-tell, or autobiographical writing assignments.

We tend to do “get-to-know-you” activities at the start of the school year but then move into core content afterward. However, if we integrate more personal get-to-know-you activities throughout the school year, students can more naturally learn about one another as they build trust over time.

### Ten Ways to Get to Know Your Students

The personal connection is critical for both customized learning and classroom leadership. Here are 10 ways to get to know your students better as people:

1. **Sporting events:** Visit sporting events. This will allow you to see both the athletes and the spectators in a different light. It’s also a chance to mingle with families.
2. **Home visits:** I find that when I do home visits, I am reminded that students come from real homes with real families. I see students through a more holistic lens.
3. **Clubs:** Many clubs hold competitions. Sometimes they are sparsely attended. I know, people are crazy enough to think that kids tackling one another is more exciting than a debate competition. Showing up to these can be a real morale booster for students.
4. **Sponsor:** Go beyond simply visiting club competitions and sporting events and volunteer to be the coach or sponsor of one. This allows you to play the role of leader in a realm that is outside the traditional classroom setting.
5. **Pop culture:** Spend a little time (emphasis on *little*) listening to the music, watching the movies, or checking out the TV shows that your students do. It’s not critical that you are up-to-date, but it does give you a picture of how marketers view the youth that you work with.

6. **Personal element to assignments:** Give students a chance to tell their stories, share their beliefs, and use their talents in assignments.
7. **Small talk:** Use the time spent on duty, standing outside your door or walking students to and from lunch as a chance to engage in small talk. Often, the talk is nowhere near as small as you might think.
8. **Transparency:** When you are humble and willing to admit mistakes, you allow students to let down their guard and share what's really going on in life.
9. **Conferences:** Some students will easily slip through the cracks if a teacher doesn't schedule one-on-one conferences. Sometimes all it takes is three five-minute conferences a day and you've met with every student in a two-week period.
10. **Surveys:** Start the school year off with surveys or learning inventories that allow you to see a student's personality, beliefs, interests, and talents.

Note that you don't need to do all of these things. Chaperoning a dance might not be your thing, and that's okay. The point is that when we gear intentionality toward building and fostering relationships with our students, we are making an investment in their learning. And not just learning in terms of how to act socially and in relationships.

Building student-teacher relationships with students isn't just to be kind. We have to shift the mindset on this. Relationships are not an optional addition to the delivery of content and the teaching of skills.

Instead, they are the foundation for all of the learning and interactions that happen in your classroom throughout the school year. The connection you form with students forms a pathway between you and them, but also the content of your class and their minds. A relationally engaged student is often an academically engaged one. Of course it's imperfect. You'll say the wrong thing. Students can hurt your feelings. You can hurt theirs. There will be conflict. It will be messy.

But name anything memorable that didn't get a little messy first.  
Access the Get to Know You Survey at [newteachermindset.com](http://newteachermindset.com).



## Notes

1. Cook, C. R., Coco, S., Zhang, Y., Fiat, A. E., Duong, M. T., Renshaw, T. L., Long, A. C., and Frank, S. (2018). Cultivating positive teacher-student relationships: Preliminary evaluation of the establish–maintain–restore (EMR) method. *APA PsycNet*. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-47899-002>
2. Kincade, Laurie, Cook, Clayton, and Goerdt, Annie. (2020). Meta-analysis and common practice elements of universal approaches to improving student-teacher relationships. *Sage Journals*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0034654320946836>

