

## **Issue: Effective Teacher-Student Communication**

How teachers communicate is one of the most critical influences in students' learning, motivation, and behavior. In evaluating the ability to communicate important content knowledge in ways that engage students, there are many effective approaches and styles. Beyond having robust knowledge of the discipline you are teaching, your supportive communication practices will build a climate of learning and motivation.

### **Strategies to Consider:**

**Build and emphasize cooperative interactions.** The following strategies establish interpersonal rapport and immediacy with students.

- Know every student's first name; greet students by name as they enter the class.
- Take time in class to engage students in conversations about their lives, interests, and families. Integrating students' backgrounds and experiences into lessons is an essential strategy in motivating students and building on previous knowledge.
- Willingly invite students' comments, questions and responses.
- Encourage students to analyze concepts and apply theories to life.
- Within appropriate boundaries, share your stories and experiences to "match" those of the students.
- Validate and praise.
- Break up the classroom space to encourage movement; push desks away or group the class in a circle or small clusters.

### **Listen actively.**

- Make frequent eye contact but don't stare.
- Face your body towards the student but respect personal space.
- Consider your body language (be relaxed and calm; avoid fidgeting, tapping, rolling eyes, etc.).
- Avoid passive listening (such as grading papers or reading while listening).
- Acknowledge and respond by nodding or saying, "I see".
- Rephrase the student's comments when s/he is finished.
- Don't interrupt the student while s/he is speaking.

**Communicate your moods.** Students may act out because they are often unable or uncomfortable expressing their feelings; circuits involved in their emotional regulation are not yet developed. You can set an appropriate example by telling students when their behavior has frustrated or irritated you. “I feel really irritated when you all talk at once because I cannot hear the good points many of you are making. I want you to take turns.” Remember your boundaries – this is not an invitation to express deeply emotional feelings about your personal life. You can also encourage students to give you an appropriate heads-up when they’re feeling sad, angry, or non-communicative as well. Allowing an irritated student to work individually instead of in a group is much better than forcing them into a situation that may cause them to act out. Being a source of emotional energy for your students helps increase positive behavior.

**Avoid public reprimands.** Initiate conversations with students privately rather than in front of their peers when a problem behavior needs to be discussed. When publicly reprimanded, a student often feels disrespected and frequently will argue publicly with the teacher to bolster their image. Students will do almost anything to avoid being embarrassed in front of their peers!

- Children may want to put blame on someone else for a problem. Encourage them to look at the situation as a problem to be solved rather than a question of blame. If the student sees that you do not put value on “fault,” then it will not be an issue in the future.
- If a student is off-task, using subtle non-verbal cues like hand motions and facial expressions is an effective way to communicate. A sincere offer of help such as “Do you need anything to get started?” is less embarrassing and communicates the same message as “Get to work.” Simply walking by students’ desks or sitting down next to them is enough to refocus their attention.

**Avoid power struggles.** Using orders (“Sit down and listen to me.”), sarcasm (“Let me guess; you forgot where my classroom is.”), or moralizing (“Life isn’t supposed to be fair.”) sends a clear message that you aren’t interested in hearing what the student is feeling, disrespects your student’s values, and sets you up for arguments, power struggles, and a punitive relationship with your students...in short, more problems.

**Respond with empathy.** In order to find out what may be behind behavioral difficulties and demonstrate that you care about your student, use empathic responses. Can you recall ever feeling vulnerable in a high-pressure situation?

- If a student has been coming late to class, try “I notice you are late again. Is there anything I can do to help you get here on time? It means a lot to me to have you here when class begins.”
- For swearing, try “Swearing is a common response to being embarrassed or angry. However, it offends me and possibly others as well. Plus, it is not acceptable behavior in a public place such as school. Can you think of something else to say when you are angry that is not so disrespectful?”
- When a student says "I s--k at math," show empathy by saying, "It's scary to feel like you don't get something." You're keying into the emotion, not telling him/her he's wrong ("You're not stupid!") or going into fix-it mode ("We'll get a tutor") or lecturing about her choice of words to express her feelings.

**Organize what you want to accomplish.** Craft your lesson plans and classroom activities so that you have a clear vision for what you intend to accomplish for each class period. Your students need to understand not only your behavioral expectations but also your framework for learning new information. When students are confused, they are more likely to misbehave or disengage.

- Award-winning teachers also begin and end each class with predictable activities. At the start, a review of due dates, a summary of information from the last class period, a preview of today's class content, or a quick quiz of the day can be provided on the board, overhead, etc. End class with a summary of that day's key points, a preview of the next class period's activities, a fun fact, or homework tip in the same way. Students can be assigned responsibility for these tasks. However you organize your regular classroom warm-ups and cool-downs, they provide time for individual questions, clarification, and personal chitchat.

**Create diverse groups.** The cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic make-up of our communities is increasingly diverse. Make a conscious effort to put students from different backgrounds in small groups together. Research has shown that working in small, cooperative groups is an effective way to help young people overcome fears and stereotypes.

- Affirm student diversity by guiding individual development and encouraging individual student interests within the group, and linking these to the overall success of the group project.
- Offer varied opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.
- Be careful not to assume that all students will respond “appropriately” to your communication style; this can create difficulties in classroom management, and pupil learning, motivation and

behavior. In some cultures, it is unthinkable that a student would question a teacher, even to ask for help in understanding a difficult concept.

- Learn cultural responses to different communication styles in order to develop and maintain an effective learning relationship and climate with all your students. Being aware of and effectively responding to students' communication needs enhances academic growth.

*If you believe your student has a communication issue, the reminders checklist below will help remind you, as a teacher, what you can do to help the student through the school day:*

### **Reminders Checklist for Effective Communication**

**Also consider:**

#### **National School Climate Center**

Kerr, M.M. & Valenti, M.W. (2009). Controls from Within the Classroom: Crises or Conversations?, *Reclaiming Children and Youth* 17(4), 30-34.

Simonsen, B., Fairbanks, S., Briech, A., Myers, D., & Sugai, G. (2008). Evidence-Based Practices in Classroom Management: Considerations for Research and Practice. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 31, 351-381.

Worley, D., Titsworth, S., Worley, D. W., & Cornett-DeVito, M. (2007) Instructional Communication Competence: Lessons Learned from Award-Winning Teachers. *Communication Studies*, 58(2), 207-222.

## How Teachers Can Help Me: Effective Communication

### When I have to participate in class discussions:

- Ask me about my ideas if I am quiet and do not participate.
- Understand that I have a hard time reading other people's emotions.
- Let me raise my hand when I'm ready; please don't call on me when I don't raise my hand.
- Let me write down my thoughts and questions if I'm not ready to speak in front of the class.
- Let me know ahead of time when we'll be having a group discussion and also what we'll be talking about.
- Don't rush me: give me time to think and answer (20 seconds could seem like a long time during a lesson!)
- Don't dismiss my ideas.
- Remind the entire class about the rules for a discussion before it starts.
- Give me a signal if I start to wander off the topic.
- Help me to extend or clarify what I am saying.
- Give me positive feedback if I join in the discussion.
- Ask me to write my peer's answers on the board.
- Use an object to remind me that the person with the object is the only person who should be talking.
- Be patient with me; sometimes I can't think of the right words to use when explaining something.
- Encourage me to take part in the discussion and ask questions.
- Encourage the whole class to be respectful of what other students say.

### When I have to listen for a long time:

- Call on me for questions so that I can concentrate and focus better.
- Print out a copy of your notes or the Power Point slides so I can follow along.
- Tell me what we'll be doing next.
- Give me something to look at that matches what you're saying.
- Allow me to write or draw pictures of what you are talking about.
- Give me a warning when we're almost done with what we're doing.
- Give the class a small break.
- Cut a long lecture into short parts.
- Tell me how long we have to listen.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Sit me away from my peers so I do not become distracted.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I may need encouragement for sitting and paying attention for a long time.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Stay close to me so that I can stay focused more easily.

**When I take a test:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Make the test questions like the ones we used for practice.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Remind me how much time I have left during the test.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Explain the question to me when I have trouble understanding what it means.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Announce the duration of the test and related rules before the test begins.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ask me to check over my answers before I turn my test in.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Explain the test instructions one at a time.

**At the end of class:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Remind me what we will be doing the next day.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Remind me of any materials I should be taking home.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Make sure I have collected all of my belongings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Make sure I have recorded all homework assignments.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Remind me of what I need to bring to class tomorrow (materials, assignments and projects).
- \_\_\_\_\_ Encourage positive behaviors when I use free class time to do homework.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Warn me that class is ending soon.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Review what we did today and let me know what to expect tomorrow in class.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ask to see if I have any questions.

**When I work alone:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Give me positive reinforcement for the work I am doing.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I need to work in a quiet place where no one can bother me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ask me if I have any questions or need any help.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Let me ask you any questions I have.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give clear directions one at a time.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Display the directions if they are not on a worksheet.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Remind me of the time we have left.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give the entire class instructions about what is expected.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Guide me to solve problems when I have trouble on a task.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give me positive feedback when I finish.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Do not mention in front of my peers if I didn't do well on my work.

\_\_\_\_\_ Remind me to check over my work when I am done.

\_\_\_\_\_ Do not stand over me to make sure I am working.

\_\_\_\_\_ Let me take some breaks; I might get bored easily.

**When I work in a group:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Give me praise for my participation and ideas.

\_\_\_\_\_ If I am not speaking or separate from the group, invite me into the group.

\_\_\_\_\_ Remind the class to use good cooperation skills.

\_\_\_\_\_ I need to know exactly what my role in the group is.

\_\_\_\_\_ If there's someone I like to talk to, keep us in different groups.

\_\_\_\_\_ Check in with my group to make sure we are doing the right thing.

\_\_\_\_\_ Put some friendly people in my group or someone who is a good role model.

\_\_\_\_\_ Give everyone in the group a specific job so that somebody doesn't get too bossy.

\_\_\_\_\_ Guide me to communicate and interact with my partners.

\_\_\_\_\_ Help me if I have conflict with the group.

\_\_\_\_\_ Make sure that I'm following along with everyone.

\_\_\_\_\_ Keep an eye on me to make sure that I'm not getting overwhelmed or frustrated.

\_\_\_\_\_ Don't make the group too big.

\_\_\_\_\_ Let me have some choice in who I work with.