

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING



AND THE BRAIN

Strategies
to Help Your
Students Thrive

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SPRENGER



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PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-4166-2949-8 ASCD product #121010

PDF E-BOOK ISBN: 978-1-4166-2951-1; see Books in Print for other formats.

Quantity discounts are available: e-mail programteam@ascd.org or call 800-933-2723, ext. 5773, or 703-575-5773. For desk copies, go to www.ascd.org/deskcopy.

ASCD Member Book No. FY21-1 (Sep 2020 PSI+). ASCD Member Books mail to Premium (P), Select (S), and Institutional Plus (I+) members on this schedule: Jan, PSI+; Feb, P; Apr, PSI+; May, P; Jul, PSI+; Aug, P; Sep, PSI+; Nov, PSI+; Dec, P. For current details on membership, see www.ascd.org/membership.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sprenger, Marilee, 1949- author.

Title: Social-emotional learning and the brain : strategies to help your students thrive / Marilee Sprenger.

Description: Alexandria, VA : ASCD, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020022066 (print) | LCCN 2020022067 (ebook) | ISBN 9781416629498 (paperback) | ISBN 9781416629511 (pdf)

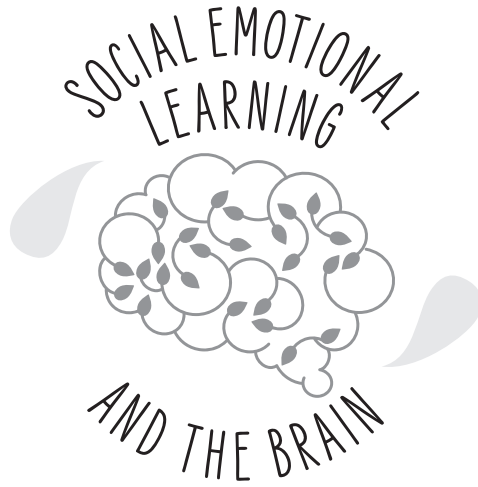
Subjects: LCSH: Affective education. | Cognitive neuroscience. | Teacher-student relationships—Psychological aspects. | Brain.

Classification: LCC LB1072 .S68 2020 (print) | LCC LB1072 (ebook) | DDC 370.15/34—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020022066>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020022067>

29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12



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Introduction

Two things should become foundational in our education system: social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed practices. As educators, we know that many of our students have been affected by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and that positive childhood experiences can counteract some of the resulting trauma. Social-emotional learning has the power to create some of those positive experiences. Furthermore, many of the SEL strategies overlap with those related to trauma-informed practices.

A recurring theme in this book is that every child has a story, and I hope that the information shared in the following pages will help rewrite some of those stories and reinforce others. The path for educators is clear: build relationships so students feel love and a sense of belonging; teach empathy so students feel understood and can provide understanding to others; make students self-aware so that feelings are understood; help students regulate feelings so they can attain and use prosocial skills; support students in becoming skilled in social awareness so they build an understanding of how

to interact with people; teach students how to handle relationships so they can work and play with people who come from various backgrounds and cultures; and finally, teach students how to choose and make wise decisions that will affect the future.

It bears repeating: every child has a story. I have a story. I am one of those adults who grew up believing that I was not good enough, that I could not fit in (although I pretended to), let alone belong anywhere. I grew up with rules that no child should grow up with: don't show your feelings; never, ever cry or your mom will leave you; never trust others—especially men (they will cheat and leave). I am one of every six adults who has experienced four or more ACEs during my lifetime (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). I know the fight-or-flight response well. As a result, my physical and mental health are at risk.

I am not sharing this information to elicit pity. Many people have had far worse experiences than mine. I did not live in poverty; I had two parents at home; I had the food, clothing, and shelter that I needed. I am sharing this information because of the two people who saved me, who literally kept me from the depression and despair hovering over me as a child, who made me realize that even though I never knew what would happen at home, I could go to the dependable, positive place that was school. Those two people were teachers. My 1st grade teacher, Miss Pauli, let me come in early to her beautiful, welcoming classroom, and she let me talk. She listened. She complimented my work and encouraged me. Fast-forward to 5th grade. Miss Williams made me feel important, that I was good enough. She is the reason, beyond any doubt, why I became a teacher. I wanted to make kids feel the way she had made me feel. She listened, she cared, she touched—gentle hugs and pats on the head or shoulder—and she checked in throughout the day to make sure we were all OK. A few other people were positive influences along the way, and I was OK until my first depressive episode in college. I eventually sought the help I needed, and I am doing well.

But I'm worried about the kids. According to John Medina (2017), humans today could live to be 115 to 122, under ideal conditions. Perhaps those conditions include healthy eating and getting enough exercise, but they must certainly also include lower levels of stress, positive relationships, family ties (within the family you were born into or the family you create), feeling empathy for and from others, and having a sense of belonging. Social-emotional learning addresses all those conditions. Furthermore, SEL improves academic achievement by an average of 11 percent, increases appropriate social behavior, improves students' attitudes, and reduces depression and stress (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

I have been a student of the brain since 1992. I have traveled, trained, and spoken with educational leader and author Eric Jensen, who has taught me much about the brain and how to find out more. Through my research, I have identified the connections in the brain that are related to the social-emotional learning competencies delineated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. This organization, which began as a group of educators and researchers committed to advancing social-emotional learning, has had a huge impact in this area for more than 20 years.

By following the work of Daniel Goleman, one of the cofounders of CASEL and author of the groundbreaking book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), and the work of neuroscientists such as Bessel van der Kolk (2014), we can see how SEL affects various areas of the brain. For instance, in this book you will learn how our "gut feelings" are directly related to the decision-making areas in our brain.

In reading the work of Daniel Kahneman, author of the best-selling book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011), we learn about the brain's two thinking systems. System 1 is fast, automatic, emotional, and unconscious. System 2 is slow, effortful, and conscious. System 1

is at work when our students react *without* thinking. SEL strategies will teach students to stop and use System 2 before they respond. One of the strategies I used with my students when they needed to respond in a situation was to ask this question: “Are you checking System 2, or is System 1 in charge?” The more students practice taking a breath and giving some thought to a situation or decision, the more likely they are to respond appropriately.

From brain structures to brain chemicals, learning takes place on an emotional level. Awareness of emotions and being able to regulate those emotions lead the way to building positive relationships, successfully solving problems, and making responsible decisions. Understanding the brain helps both students and teachers rely on strategies that will activate the appropriate parts of the brain and will be suitable for whatever experience they encounter. For example, when students know that getting upset activates the *limbic* (emotional) brain and blocks the connection between the thinking brain and the emotional brain, they realize the importance of having and using strategies to calm themselves before speaking or acting.

Brain Structures and Chemicals Related to SEL

One of the simpler ways to look at the brain is from the bottom to the top. The spinal cord is connected to the *brain stem*, the lowermost part of the brain. The brain stem contains the first filtering system for information that comes into the brain via our senses. This system is called the *reticular activating system*, or RAS; it filters out about 99 percent of incoming information. If the information entering is in some way threatening, the RAS may halt the flow of information in favor of sending out an alarm throughout the brain. When the next level, the *limbic system*, receives the alarm, many activities begin. First, the *amygdala*, the brain’s second filter,

examines the information. The *hypothalamus*, which is part of the limbic system, sends out chemicals to prepare the body and brain for a fight-or-flight response. Other chemicals, such as *adrenaline*, which is released from the adrenal glands, cause the heart to beat faster and increase the rate of breathing. Unless the body is in immediate danger, whatever the stressor is, the thinking brain should decide what next steps to take. But the pathway from the thinking brain (the *frontal lobe*; in particular, the *prefrontal cortex*) down to the reflexive brain (the limbic system and the brain stem) is slow. If we put all our focus on the amygdala, the limbic structure in charge of emotions, it will (along with the *hippocampus*, a structure related to memory) bring to mind all the horrors of this particular stress-inducing phenomenon. For example, if we are approaching a large German shepherd and previously had a bad experience with a similar dog, that memory will drive our brain and we will expect a repetition of the bad incident.

Emotions influence where new information is processed in the brain. For learning to become memory, it must be directed through the emotional filter (the amygdala) along the route to the reflective, higher brain—the prefrontal cortex. When this happens, the brain takes a responsible look at the situation and finds a better way to handle it. Perhaps, in the German shepherd example, the thinking brain will notice that this dog is on a leash and would be unable to reach us.

Several chemical “cocktails” run our brains. *Neurotransmitters* such as dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, and oxytocin are some of the most common. Cortisol, the stress hormone, is also involved in many situations, both positive and negative. Cortisol is released when we are a little anxious about a presentation, an interview, or meeting someone for the first time—examples of good stress. It is also released when our brains are preparing for survival. That fight, flight, or freeze situation—bad stress—prompts the release of much more cortisol.

And what is the antidote to stress? According to Foreman (2019), the antidote is trust.

I have created the word *celebrate* to define the premise of my work. *Celebrate* stands for “social-emotional learning elicits brain responses appropriate to experience.” It’s a lot to say, but it says a lot. Social-emotional learning should help our students choose the appropriate response in whatever situation they may find themselves. Neuroscience researchers have found areas and chemicals in the brain that respond to certain learning strategies. I want us to be able to understand why a response occurs and then create more strategies that will engage the same areas of the brain.

Don’t Let Emotion Drive the Bus!

Mo Willems’s book *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* was a favorite of my youngest granddaughter, Maeve, so I read it to her often. I also used it as the inspiration for her birthday book, which is a collection of photos from throughout the year that I usually make into some kind of story (I do one every year for each of my grandchildren). Maeve’s fifth book, titled *Don’t Let Maeve Drive the Bus!*, was filled with wonderful things that Maeve could do, like playing soccer, reading, and climbing, but it conveyed the message that we would never want a 5-year-old to drive!

Along those same lines, we don’t want emotions driving our lives. Adding to our lives? Yes. Driving our learning? Yes. My friend Robert Sylwester, author of *A Celebration of Neurons* (1995), tells us that “emotions drive attention, which drives learning, memory, and just about everything else” (p. 99). But we should also keep in mind Brené Brown’s warning against emotion as the sole driver of learning: “If emotion is driving, where is logic and thought? In the back seat? Or worse, in the trunk!” (Jarvis, 2019).

Storytelling in the Brain

The power of storytelling can be traced to the brain and its chemical reactions. Whether reading a story or listening to one, it appears that a specific cascade of chemicals is involved in the engagement. Think of yourself listening to a story. Because it is about something unknown, your brain releases the stress hormone cortisol. This release occurs not because of fear or anger but, rather, curiosity. You are ready for the novelty and perhaps suspense. Dopamine is also released to keep you focused on what is going to happen. Because this is a novel situation (an unknown story), you must be prepared for anything and remain on task until you know the ending. Novelty engages the brain because something novel may also be dangerous. Survival first! Dopamine rewards us by keeping us alert and getting to the goal—the end of the story. When we identify with characters in the story, oxytocin is released. Oxytocin is the trust chemical, the “friending juice” in the brain. It has often been described as the “love” or “cuddle” chemical. According to Paul Zak (2013), director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies and professor of economics, psychology, and management at Claremont Graduate University, experiments show that character-driven stories with emotional content result in a better understanding of key points and better recall of the information.

One of the primary questions I have sought to answer in this book is this: because storytelling is so powerful and memorable, what other strategies will cause the release of the same chemicals to provide lasting memories and good feelings? One answer that is addressed in this book is role-playing.

Chapter Overview

As I discovered which brain structures and chemicals were involved in the SEL competencies mentioned previously, the next step was

to find strategies that would activate the brain in the same way. Explanations of those strategies make up much of the content of this book. However, in addition to incorporating SEL strategies into their instruction, teachers need to examine the SEL competencies for themselves. As I worked on each chapter, I asked myself questions such as these: *How self-aware am I? Can I name and tame my emotions? Do I make sure I am aware of my students' perspectives? How can I teach students to handle relationships with others if I may be having relationship issues myself? Do I make responsible decisions when I am interacting at school?* Here is an overview of the chapters that follow.

Chapter 1: Building Teacher-Student Relationships

The teacher-student relationship is the primary component of and precursor to a true social-emotional learning environment. In this chapter, I discuss building relationships with students and share various strategies. The mantra of many teachers who are interested in SEL and want to begin to implement trauma-informed practices is “Maslow before Bloom,” a concept whose essence is the idea that dealing with students’ needs first will allow us to remove some possible barriers to learning.

Chapter 2: Empathy

According to experts, empathy is a major problem for today’s students (Borba, 2016). In this chapter, I define different types of empathy and describe how, throughout brain development, we can see where activity related to empathy is located and which chemicals are released during empathic episodes. Some neuroscientists believe that empathy leads us to compassion, and these two ideas are considered. I share examples of what empathic students do and how empathy can be modeled, as well as strategies to teach empathy and compassion to all students.

Chapter 3: Self-Awareness

In this chapter, I define and discuss the first SEL competency as delineated by CASEL: self-awareness. Recognizing our own emotions is vital to the SEL process; identifying emotions in ourselves allows us to recognize those emotions in others. In addition, teaching students to recognize and name their own emotions leads them to the ability to manage those emotions. Which emotions are innate and which are learned is also a focus of this chapter. Finally, I present strategies for teaching and modeling self-awareness.

Chapter 4: Self-Management

One of teachers' greatest concerns is dealing with behavior issues. Research supports the belief that students' ability to manage their own emotions is key to changing some undesirable behaviors. In this chapter, I identify areas of the brain related to self-management and discuss the struggles between brain structures. I also address stress and ways to manage it, as well as the importance of classroom rituals and routines pertaining to managing and eliciting brain states with stories and examples. Strategies for teaching self-management skills, from the "CBS method" to the "break-up letter," cover all grade levels.

Chapter 5: Social Awareness

From self-management we move into social awareness—helping students become more sensitive to the feelings of others. In this chapter, I explain that once students can recognize and manage their own emotions, they are ready to interact with others in an emotionally intelligent way. An examination of areas in the brain related to social awareness leads to a discussion of social pain and the ways that bullying can affect others. As students gain empathy skills, we can teach and practice social awareness strategies.

Chapter 6: Relationship Skills

The focus in Chapter 1 was on building our relationships with our students. In this chapter, the focus is on teaching students how to handle their own relationships. Beginning with finding which areas of the brain are active when handling relationships in an empathic way and then focusing on brain states and peer pressure, the discussion concludes with strategies that we can use every day to build this important SEL competency.

Chapter 7: Responsible Decision Making

As the prefrontal cortex continues to grow and develop, making responsible decisions should become easier for students. That development is dependent on how often they are offered the opportunity to make decisions. This chapter focuses on helping students identify their values and beliefs for decision making. With the other competencies addressed, students will be able to understand how their decisions affect others in the present and the future. Teaching students how to be a role model for others in this arena includes modeling our own decision-making process, offering choices and discussing possible outcomes, and providing group work to further the applications and results of good decision making.

Chapter 8: People, Not Programs: The Positive Impact of SEL

According to Bruce Perry, child psychiatrist and senior fellow of the Child Trauma Academy in Houston, Texas, programs don't change people—*people* change people! With this in mind, this chapter addresses how to promote the use of SEL every day for teachers and for students. It also emphasizes the need for positive childhood experiences to counterbalance adverse childhood experiences. All students can benefit from schools that implement SEL and trauma-informed practices. At a minimum, schools using

SEL need to be aware of and sensitive to the effects of trauma. This chapter also provides resources for digging deeper into these topics.



Building Teacher-Student Relationships

The brain is most interested in survival and has a deep need for relating to others.

—John Medina

If you read no other chapter in this book, read this one. This reading alone will make a big impact in your classroom—as it could in *every* classroom. Building and maintaining relationships is the core of life. The central role of relationships is also backed by research. According to Hattie (2017), positive relationships between teacher and student have an effect size on learning of 0.52. The effect size is a measure of how important a difference is between two groups. This means that based on a meta-analysis of relationships, teacher-student relationships can accelerate learning more than the average 0.40, which represents a year’s worth of growth. Before we can teach students how to handle relationships with their peers, we, as educators, need to model relationship building.

When it comes to the subject of history, there isn't a finer teacher than Sarah. She loves her content and can often mesmerize her students with stories, monologues, and rare tidbits of information about a country's war heroes and relationships, both personal and professional. When the school survey was given to 6th through 12th grade students, however, Sarah did not fare well.

She was crushed when she reviewed the answers her students gave in several areas. Although 88 percent of her students agreed that Sarah explained things in a different way if students didn't understand, only 15 percent said that she noticed when they were having difficulty, and only 5 percent said that she helped them when they were upset.

At first, Sarah was angry. She thought, "With all the time I spend preparing the best lessons for them, making sure that I help them see and hear history, how can they say I don't notice their content and personal issues? What's wrong with them?"

By the time Mr. Mercer called her in for a meeting to discuss the results, Sarah had begun to calm down and was trying to figure out how the students had come to their conclusions. She sat down across from her principal and mentor. He smiled and began by saying, "Sarah, you know you are a great teacher and you reach most of your students. Your teaching style is above reproach. My observations in your classroom have shown me how you can dazzle reluctant learners, and whether I'm observing your 8th graders absorbing the nuances of the Civil War or your 10th graders tackling the reasons leading up to the war in Vietnam, your kids view you as a knowledgeable historian. You can make them feel connected to Holocaust victims and survivors, but you don't seem to make them feel connected to you! It wasn't until I studied the surveys that I realized this.

"I apologize for not looking closely enough to realize that you have a relationship with your class, but you don't really relate

to your individual students. That is, you don't have a personal relationship with them. Your dynamic presentation of material draws them to the content, but you must establish a way to draw them to you. They need to trust you as a person. Many of them need to feel noticed as individuals. Seventy-four percent say that you give them specific suggestions for improving their work, and out of the 150 students you teach, that says a lot. But only 25 percent say that you support them both inside and outside the classroom. Let's talk about what you can do to increase this. You see, the students who are upset about this are the ones who can't get your full attention, the kids who need to know someone cares about them, not just their content or their grades.

"It's not always easy to build relationships with pre-adolescents and adolescents. You and the other adults in their lives are their last best chance to get beyond some of the trauma and stress they experience—many on a daily basis."

At this, Sarah sat back in her chair and sighed. "Mr. Mercer, I've never been good with relationships. Even though I can conjure up unusual and interesting lessons, I don't relate to people well. I think I need to take a course!"

Sarah isn't the only one with this problem. If you ask adults how many teachers they had meaningful relationships with—that is, how many teachers they trusted and knew cared about them—most respondents would probably come up with only one or two from grades K–12 and most likely none at the university level.

But the brain isn't finished developing until the mid-20s, and it needs so much guidance! When we ignore the importance of meaningful teacher-student relationships, we miss opportunities to help our students grow and relate to others in their world. Whether you teach kindergartners or postgraduate students, building relationships with those brains that are entrusted to you—even for just a few

hours per week—offers the largest payoff in terms of learning and working in a world full of people with whom relationships can be life-changing. In other words, *relationships should come first* in the classroom, the staff room, and the board room. The goal should be to prepare our students for making lasting connections throughout their lives.

Maslow Before Bloom

“You can’t take care of the Bloom stuff until you take care of the Maslow stuff!” says Alan Beck (1994), founder of Advantage Academy. Beck was born into poverty, but with the help of various teachers along the way, he became a successful student, attained a PhD, and pursued a successful career in education that eventually led to opening the academy. He pledged to teach students in a way that provides hope for the future.

Beck’s comment about Bloom and Maslow refers to the work of Benjamin Bloom (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956) and Abraham Maslow (1998). Most teachers have a basic knowledge of the work of Abraham Maslow, who created a hierarchy of human needs. They also are aware of the push to use Bloom’s taxonomy, a hierarchy of learning objectives classified into levels of complexity. Bloom’s work is usually presented only in the cognitive domain, leaving out the affective and sensory domains. However, getting our students up the scale of Bloom’s taxonomy is impossible without first meeting their basic needs. Too often our traditional approach to education has focused on levels of cognitive learning, leading up to higher-order thinking and largely ignoring students’ needs.

Today, many schools and organizations are focusing on Maslow’s hierarchy. But in my most recent book on memory, *How to Teach So Students Remember* (Sprenger, 2018), I offer a comparison between Maslow’s hierarchy and the hierarchy presented by

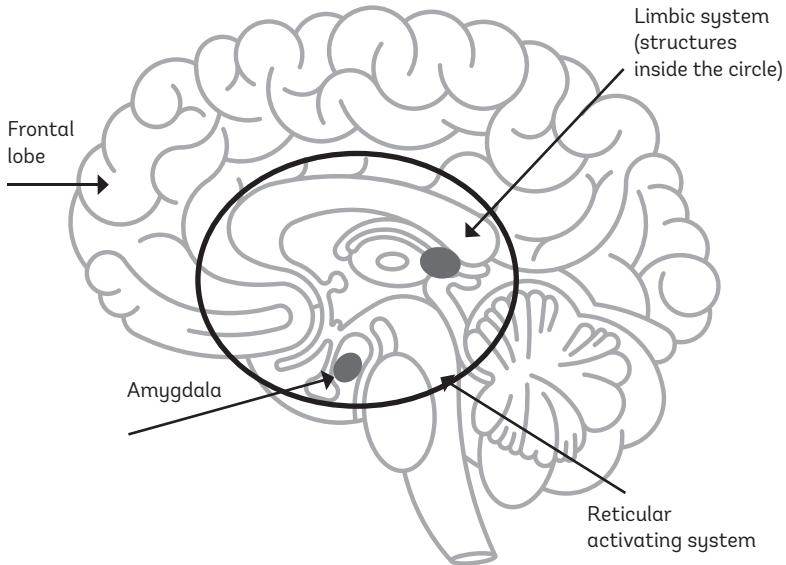
Matthew Lieberman (2013), who believes that Maslow had it wrong. Maslow's hierarchy arranges basic needs this way: physiological, safety, belonging and love, esteem, and self-actualization. Lieberman, in contrast, believes that we should begin with belonging and love. He argues that it is relationships that provide us with our physiological needs and safety needs. Think of an infant who needs food or a diaper change or warmth. The infant obtains those things through crying to get the attention of a caregiver. Following Lieberman's view, I like to present the argument that our students hold their social needs above some of their physiological needs. (Think of the 7th grade girl who almost wets her pants rather than run to the restroom because teams are being chosen for volleyball.) Belonging comes first! (I describe Lieberman's research on social pain, a related concept, in Chapter 5.)

Getting back to the quote from Alan Beck, social-emotional learning gives students the opportunity to deal with stress and anxiety, so they will be able to focus on higher-level thinking. Maslow before Bloom!

Relationships in the Brain

When studying the brain, neuroscientists look at both structures and chemical reactions. The *frontal lobe* houses the structures where most brain activity occurs when people care about each other, trust each other, and want to be friends. The *limbic system* houses the *amygdala*, the seat of emotion. The limbic system is loaded with receptors for chemicals for two different hormonal systems: the stress-response system and the trust/love system (Cantor, 2019). (See Figure 1.1.) When we are stressed, *cortisol* is released, triggering the stress response. By contrast, when we care about and trust someone, *oxytocin* is released and we feel connected.

Figure 1.1

Relationships in the Brain

A true connection goes deeper than casual acquaintance. Rather, it involves someone who offers motivation, excitement, or even comfort. When we begin a relationship, the brain releases *dopamine*, *noradrenaline*, and, as just mentioned, *oxytocin* (Pearce, Włodarski, Machin, & Dunbar, 2017). The limbic system is stimulated and the reticular activating system (the brain’s first filter) in the brain stem is relaxed, which allows new information to enter the brain in a calm way and make its way up to the limbic system. Dopamine is the brain’s “seeking” chemical (Davis & Montag, 2019); it keeps us working toward a goal and stimulates our brain’s reward system. When we connect with others, we feel good about ourselves and the other person. Noradrenaline is an excitatory chemical. Oxytocin, as noted, is released when we feel an attachment. Once a relationship is established with someone, even thinking about that person can cause the release of oxytocin and dopamine.

Strategies for Building Teacher-Student Relationships

As I mentioned in the introduction to this book, I created the word *celebrate* to stand for “social-emotional learning elicits brain responses appropriate to experience.” Many researchers (including Nadine Burke Harris, Bruce Perry, Marc Hackett, Eric Jensen, and David Sousa) tell us that a single relationship with an adult can change the course of a student’s life. Classroom teachers probably spend more time with students than any other adults. This is an opportunity to model appropriate social interactions, show students that we care for them, and support them in their endeavors. These may sound like parental responsibilities, but our children—our future citizens—are everyone’s responsibility. We can positively affect our students’ brains. Educational consultant and author Horatio Sanchez (2015) says, “For the brain to do anything, chemical movements have to occur. Health is the ability to manage all the different chemicals the brain produces within a normative range at all times.” This ability creates a kind of *homeostasis*—a state of internal balance and stability among interdependent elements. The following strategies are intended to help teachers help their students reach this level of balance and stability.

Display Vulnerability

Researcher, author, and public speaker Brené Brown (2018) has addressed the need for displaying vulnerability in our lives and in our relationships. We need to model for students that we are willing to be vulnerable (which includes being honest and transparent) and create a safe space for them to do so, too. Displaying vulnerability ranges from admitting you are feeling tired and irritated after an all-nighter with a sick child to acknowledging that you grabbed the wrong assessment from your file and, as a result, students were asked some questions that had not been discussed in class. For

students, it can range from attempting to answer a question when they are not sure they are correct to admitting they overreacted to a remark from another student. When our students show up, put forth effort, and fail, it's important to let them know that we all have those experiences and it's OK. We understand one another, and we keep going.

One of my favorite Brené Brown suggestions is to say, “This is the story I am telling myself right now . . .” and then explain how you are feeling about what is happening. For instance, “The story I am telling myself right now is that you are upset with me or someone in the class, and that is driving the behavior I am seeing. Is my story correct?” From this point, you can usually lead students to tell their story.

Greet Students at the Door

A recent study suggests that greeting and welcoming students each morning increased achievement by 20 percent and lowered disruptive behaviors by 9 percent (Cook, Fiat, & Larson, 2018). The study included the following suggestions for teachers:

- Say the student's name.
- Make eye contact.
- Use a friendly nonverbal greeting, such as a handshake, high five, or thumbs-up.
- Give a few words of encouragement.
- Ask students how their day is going.

My granddaughter once said to me, “My favorite part of coming to your house is knowing you'll be waiting at the door to see us! How do you know exactly when we will be there?” In response, I said, “It's simple, Maeve. When you look forward to seeing someone—you know, that ‘I can't wait’ feeling—you make that foremost in your mind. I ask your parents to text me when you are close, and I wait

at the door. I always greet my students at the door to let them know how excited I am to see them and that I care about them!”

And so I did—and I do. The truth? As a teacher, I couldn’t wait to see most students, but I had to be there for *all* of them; so I was always at the door to greet them. In fact, some classes waited outside the door until I showed up to welcome them in. I did this every day, for every class. And it made a difference. For those who did not appear to be receptive, I was still there, smiling, saying, “Good morning” or “Hello” or just “Happy to see you!”

They were 5th graders. It was a tough school, a tough crowd. It was hard for me to believe that 11-year-olds could be scary—that is, until I stood before them. I was acting assistant principal when one of our 5th grade teachers divorced her husband, broke her contract, and moved away with her two kids. She had been struggling for months with her marriage and had used up all her sick days for mental health reasons and to see her attorney.

The students at this school came from backgrounds of generational poverty or broken homes or had a parent in prison. They had trusted this teacher, and slowly, over time, she had let them down, just as their parents had let them down. When she left, the students trusted no one and found yet again that they were alone in the world. They were angry. And we know that anger is the bodyguard of fear. They were afraid to trust. After several subs came and went, we decided that I would take over this class until the end of the year.

We were one month into the second semester. I stood at the door that first morning to shake their hands and say hello. Only 2 of the 24 students reciprocated with a handshake. Most looked at me blankly. One of the students, Jamail, said, “What are you doing here? Who’s in trouble?”

After they all entered and were seated, I turned off the music I had playing. I explained that I was going to be their teacher and

hoped that we could all work together to make the class and learning successful for everyone.

Every day I stood at the door to greet them and shake their hands. Every day the response was the same. I thought about giving up on the morning greeting. The students had felt abandoned; I was feeling rejected.

In time, the students responded somewhat to the brain-compatible learning strategies that I used. They began to feel more successful as they interacted with one another, worked in cooperative groups, and became more aware of others' feelings as well as their own. It was the social-emotional learning connection that made a difference.

After 17 mornings of my standing by the door to greet them, the "leader of the pack" reached out to shake my hand. Quinn, the best-dressed and cockiest student of all, shook my hand and echoed back my greeting when he said, "Good morning. I'm glad you're here today." Was he just mocking me? It didn't matter. At least it was a response!

After that, the other students slowly followed suit. What made the difference? It wasn't my persistence. It wasn't my smile. They didn't feel sorry for me because no one would respond. It was the fact that I was there—every day. I showed up. I couldn't dare be absent. They had to see that they could again count on someone.

No one has to explain to you how to greet a friend, but, after making eye contact and saying the person's name, you can make a greeting more powerful by doing one of the following:

- **Ask a question:** What's your favorite _____? (You can ask about color, season, food, kind of pizza, animal, and so on.)
- **Make a request:** I could use your help with a bulletin board. (Alternatives might include using an app, solving a problem, or taking attendance.)

- **Use nonverbal signals:** These may include smiles, high fives, handshakes, hugs. (It took a long time before some students would let me touch them—particularly those who had been mistreated or abused in some way. Be patient and know that some students may never let you touch them.)

You Say Hello; You Say Goodbye

Welcoming students with a greeting is a great strategy, but saying goodbye can be just as important. Teachers in middle and high school may have difficulty with this, but leaving your last-period classroom and being in the hall when students are packing up at their lockers and heading out the door can be powerful. They will know that you care when you leave your desk and papers for a few minutes to say goodbye, remind them about an assignment, or tell them you look forward to seeing them tomorrow. That tough group of 5th graders softened up even more at the end of the day. Helping pack up a backpack, asking how their day was, and just saying, “See you tomorrow!” let them know I cared and would be there for them. It was a little sad yet heartwarming when a few of the kids leaving would ask, “See you tomorrow?”

Tell Your Story

One strategy that has been heavily researched is storytelling. As Burton (2019) tells us, our brain takes information and puts it in story form as it tries to make sense of the world. Research has uncovered the “chemical cocktail” that occurs in the brain when we listen to or read a story. First, dopamine is released as we derive pleasure from listening to the story. Small amounts of cortisol are released when there is some distress or uncertainty as “the plot thickens.” Finally, oxytocin is released as we relate to the characters and learn the outcome. Dopamine is released again as a reward—that is, the satisfaction and pleasure derived from the solution to the problem or the outcome of the story.

What does storytelling have to do with relationships? Everything. It begins with your relationships with your students. Talking about yourself, your family, and your activities helps build rapport with your students. Involving them in a problem and asking them to help provides a solution that connects them to you.

For instance, in one large 6th grade class consisting of 32 students (21 boys and 11 girls), it wasn't easy to get to know each student quickly. Their teacher, Mrs. Tate, often began each day with a story relating to the content (history or literature) that would be covered that day, and she would try to put the students in the story. When they studied the Civil War, she might begin a story like this: "Imagine yourself wanting to join your friends to save your 'country.' You are out to protect your family, your home, and possibly your freedom. You put on a heavy uniform, if you have one. In the early days of the war, not everyone had a uniform. To make matters more complicated, you might have a blue uniform. This was tricky. If you were fighting for the South, the Confederacy, you were to wear gray. The Northerners, the Union, were the ones who wore blue. So if you fought for the South and all you had to wear was a blue uniform, you could get shot by your own side! What would you do to keep yourself safe?"

A story like this focuses students on the content and their own emotions—and strengthens their relationship with Mrs. Tate. In essence, she is asking each individual student in the class what they would do. The question elevates them to a sense that "we're all in this together."

Use Five Ways to Show You Care

It was Teddy Roosevelt who said, "Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care." Letting students know that you truly do care about them is often easier with younger kids than with preteens and teenagers. Students need to know we care, and here are five ways, according to Fisher and Frey (2019), to show we are invested in relationships with them:

- **Providing structure:** Rules should be fair and apply to all; having consistent expectations for every student is key.
- **Offering choice:** Students, particularly teens, seek autonomy, and when possible, they need to be involved in decisions that are going to affect them personally.
- **Showing interest:** Discovering information about their lives, asking questions about their music, and attending their athletic events (or at least knowing the scores) are ways to demonstrate your interest.
- **Being optimistic:** Express to students through speech and actions that you believe in their ability to succeed.
- **Acknowledging their feelings:** Show emotional support and help them process their feelings.

Keeping these things in mind, let's consider middle to high school students. Their schedules don't allow for a lot of one-on-one time. In addition, teachers who have five or six different classes each day have less time to build relationships. Nevertheless, making the effort to do so is well worth it.

Write Notes to Students

Keep envelopes with each student's name in your desk and occasionally write notes to students. Let students know what you appreciate about them or how you liked some of their work. You might keep the envelopes in a file, and after you give a student a letter, put that student's envelope at the back of the bunch. This way you can be certain to reach out to every student.

Stick It to Them

In a variation of the note-writing strategy, keep a stack of sticky notes handy, and whenever a student does something that you want to point out, write it on a sticky note and put the note on the student's desk, locker, or notebook. The note can be anything from

“You played a great game last night!” to “I saw you helping the new student, and I’m sure he appreciated it!”

Be a Name-Caller

Self-improvement author and lecturer Dale Carnegie once said, “A person’s name is to him or her the sweetest and most important sound in any language.” Be the person who knows students’ names. In some cases, be their “person.” One of my favorite television shows was *Grey’s Anatomy*. What attracted me most were the relationships among the doctors and how they built those relationships. The first time I heard one doctor say to her friend, “You’re my person,” I was instantly struck by the emotion I felt. I know that serotonin and oxytocin were released in my brain—the first to calm my body and make me feel good, and the second to make me feel connected to these characters and to remind me who “my person” was at varying times in my life. In an issue of *Educational Leadership* with the theme “What Teens Need from Schools,” a column by Fisher and Frey (2019) features a video showing Demetrius Davenport, dean of students at Health Sciences High and Middle College, who clearly is one of those educators who goes out of his way to know all the students’ names and tries to speak to them daily.

Pat Wolfe, author of *Brain Matters* (2010), often talked about the “cocktail party effect” during her presentations. This phenomenon refers to the brain’s ability to block out chatter in situations such as a cocktail party, where many conversations are occurring at the same time and the brain has the ability to filter out talk that is not important. However, the moment that you hear your name, your brain instantly begins to focus on the conversation that included your name.

This effect has been studied for decades, and as a result neuroscience is getting closer to identifying the exact areas that react to our name being mentioned. The fact is that we are attracted to the sound of our name on many levels. The reticular activating system

in the brain stem, which is associated with instincts and controls breathing and other vital functions, responds to our name because survival may be involved. Perhaps our name is going to be followed by a warning to “watch out!” The survival brain does not want to miss the opportunity to save us. And the emotional brain is going to respond to this “name calling” because it may represent the beginning of a compliment, a reprimand, or a pleasurable realization that someone important to you knows your name. Our names are so powerful that even patients in vegetative states show brain activation when their names are spoken (Carmody & Lewis, 2006; NameCoach, 2017). Imagine how important it is for students to hear their own names—pronounced correctly, with a positive connotation! Let’s encourage, motivate, and connect with our students in the most basic way by learning and remembering to use their names when speaking to or about them. “Candace, I see that you finished your project, and I can’t wait to listen to your presentation!” “Hakim, you look like you have an idea to add to our list. We’d like to hear it!”

Simple statements help us connect to the people around us, so let’s use our “name-calling” abilities to build relationships. You will be helping to create a feeling of belonging that can make a world of difference to your students.

Call on Each Student Regularly

If we want to build strong relationships with students, we have to be fair in how we show them that we care. We all have students who want to be called on all the time. They know the answers; they ask the questions. We’d like to have a whole classroom full of “those” kids. And then we have the students who never want to be called on. They may not know the answers, may not be interested, or are just embarrassed to be singled out. So from the beginning, we have to show students that we are trying to be fair. Here are two helpful strategies:

- **Popsicle Stick, or Equity Stick:** Write each student’s name on a Popsicle stick, place the sticks in a cup, and draw one name each time you ask a question. Have a second cup to put the sticks in after you ask a question.
- **Stack the Deck:** This strategy involves writing each student’s name on an index card. You begin calling on students by picking off the top of the deck each time you ask a question. Once in a while, you can “stack” the deck by putting more than one card in for some students who need the opportunity to speak.

For both these strategies, you may want to drop the stack of cards or spill the Popsicle sticks occasionally. You can then say, “Oops! I guess we’re starting over!” Doing this keeps students on their toes even though they have already been called on.

Go the Extra Mile

We can go the extra mile in a number of ways. When I was teaching in high-crime urban areas, it was sometimes scary to attend events in the evening, but together my colleagues and I tried to attend athletic events, debates, reader’s theater, and class plays to show our support for our students.

Often when we join a staff at a school, we are asked to take on an extracurricular activity. Doing so can be a great way to build relationships with students. Even if the activity involves only a small number of the students you teach, it’s a beginning. Sometimes you may be able to ask students to join your group to let them know that you care and believe in their ability to take on whatever responsibility is involved.

Other ways to go the extra mile include the following:

- Riding the bus with a student who is fearful of other students or doesn’t know where to get off
- Sending positive notes home

- Making home visits
- Calling a student after a bad day and discussing it with the parting words “I know tomorrow will be better!”
- Learning an English learner’s native language, even if only to speak a small number of common words and phrases.

Try 2 × 10

The 2 × 10 strategy has been used as far back as 1983, when it was introduced by Ray Wlodkowski, and it has become a highly effective teaching practice that appears to work almost universally. The strategy is simple: spend 2 minutes per day for 10 consecutive days talking with an at-risk student about anything the student wants to talk about. Many teachers use this technique with all students. The 2 × 10 strategy takes the pressure off both you and the student. It’s a brief intervention for at-risk students and a great relationship-building activity.

This strategy is particularly helpful, according to teachers at all grade levels, in dealing with disruptive students. Practice with one student at a time. Most likely, you will find that after the 10 days, you can have brief positive encounters with that student and maintain a healthy relationship.

Mrs. Walshart has assigned her students to cooperative groups to work on their science project. Avi just couldn’t settle down and was interrupting the students in his group as well as students in other groups. Rather than reprimand him (an action that might lead to another struggle), Mrs. Walshart called him up to her desk and began talking to him about what had been going on in his life. Much to her surprise, Avi told her that his father had left home two weeks earlier, his mother was looking for a job, and he (Avi) was in charge of his younger sister both before and after school. It was little wonder that Avi was not himself. After that

short, barely two-minute talk, Mrs. Walshart sent Avi back to his group and asked him to listen to his teammates and try to contribute to the project. He did so with no further difficulties that day.

The next day, Mrs. Walshart asked Avi how things were going. He shared a funny story about breakfast being a disaster, as his mom usually fixed wonderful food, and he barely knew how to cook. Mrs. Walshart laughed along with Avi and then offered a brief story of her own. Avi's behavior was much better that day. Mrs. Walshart thought, "Two days down and eight to go!"

Her relationship with Avi and other students improved so much after using the strategy that, whenever she could, Mrs. Walshart took two minutes with other students and improved the overall quality of her relationships with them. Discipline problems were no longer the most important factor in her teaching.

Some teachers say they don't have time to use the strategy—they're seemingly unable to find even two minutes per day to talk to a student. In such cases, I ask if I or someone else can come into the classroom to observe. I know how busy teachers are; I may have said the same thing years ago. When I observe the class, I am focusing on time—our most precious commodity. It never fails that if I am in the class at the right moment, I will see a teacher spending time—from a few seconds to a few minutes—correcting student behavior. I write down the times when this occurs, and after class the teacher and I talk about not only the time spent with the corrections, but also the amount of time needed to get back on task—for both the teacher and the student. Usually it's more than two minutes.

I think many kids desperately want to talk to someone. The first step in the 2×10 strategy may be the hardest, and with really tough cases, you may want to start a conversation with a student who likes to speak with you, and do so near the target student. You might even

invite that student into the conversation. Remember, it's not a conversation about schoolwork. It's a conversation about getting to know each other.

The following is one of my favorite stories about relationship building, involving a sophomore in my basic English class.

Will was a little bit scary to me. He wore a black leather jacket that he never took off, black pants, black leather boots, and chains of some sort hanging from several pockets. When I tried to engage him in class, he looked at me like... well, like he didn't care for me—or perhaps any other human. He was the only student in my class with whom I could not build rapport. One day, I was walking down the hall and saw Will at his locker. He had earbuds in his ears, and as he turned around, there I was! I think it surprised him. I had been hoping to avoid him; but here we were, face to face, and he looked at me quizzically. I didn't know what to say, but knew I had to say something. I opened with, "Hi, Will! What are you listening to?" It was a rock group—heavy metal, I think—and I had never heard of them. He sort of grunted the name. I responded, "Can I listen?" He took the earbuds out of his ears and offered them to me. They were connected to his phone. I listened for a minute or so; I could barely stand the music. At what I thought was an appropriate time, I took the buds out, smiling all the while, and said, "Cool! Thanks!" He continued to look at me like I might be a bit crazy, so I said, "That brightened my day! I'll see you in class!"

If I told you he magically became a model student after that encounter, I would be lying. But to me it *was* magic, because from that point on, he looked at me with less disdain. He didn't offer to answer questions, nor did he ask any, but he spoke when spoken to. He nodded to me and a few others in the class. It was amazing. I never caught him in the hall again, but when I saw him in the cafeteria (I always

make a point of eating in the cafeteria with the students on Fridays—another way to build relationships), we exchanged a few words and sometimes I even got a smile.

Like some other teachers, you may feel that you have nothing in common with some students, but you *do*. You just have to find out what it is. To begin, don't lead with a question. The students who most need the 2 × 10 strategy are often reluctant to answer, and in their experience, teachers do nothing but ask questions. Instead, try to begin with a comment. “My daughter has those jeans! She loves them, and she wears them all the time. I was thinking about getting a pair. Are they comfortable?” Even if I only get a nod in response, I've begun to set something up. Here's another example: “I'm trying to figure out what to get my son for his birthday. Any great ideas come to mind? I was thinking about a _____.” Students are almost always responsive to this one. I've shared a little of my life with them this way, and my hope is that with the next encounter, they'll share a little of their life with me. If you have done any “getting to know you” activities (such as “A River Runs Through Us,” described on page 34), you may lead with a bit of information you gleaned from those.

Assign Seats

What? How does assigned seating build relationships with students? When students know they have a place in your classroom, that knowledge builds on the idea that they belong somewhere. This is one of those simple background strategies that may be particularly effective with students who find that school is a safer place than home. “My seat. My space. My photos. My cubby. My team.” All these possessives may be meaningful to your kids—you know, those kids who become “*my* kids!” You carry them with you in your heart forever—as I do with Will, the “scary” student in my basic English class. He grew up, gave up the motorcycle. (Did I mention the motorcycle? That explains the leather.) He married a niece of one of the teachers. They are living happily ever after.

Schedule Advisories

Advisory class meetings are another way to build relationships, and they're great for all grade levels. Usually scheduled at the beginning of the day, advisory groups at the middle-grade levels then travel together to their classes. The brain loves ritual, and this daily get-together allows students to share their feelings, listen respectfully (an ability that is a characteristic of self-control), and comment in positive ways. Students who are coming from chaotic homes and those who have experienced trauma may find that this is a special place to belong. They have a group in which they can share information with a caring adult who is overseeing the dialogue that takes place. Advisories can have a calming effect and prepare students emotionally for the academic day.

At the high school level, many of the purposes of advisories are the same, but the schedule of the day is, of course, different. Advisory purposes can be academic, motivational, relational, to plan a learning pathway, to discuss post-high school plans, or simply to help students feel included and accepted. This may be a time for students to share thoughts and concerns or perhaps compliments. Everyday advisories are ideal, but scheduling them for twice a week will work, too. Here are some ideas for how to fit an advisory meeting into the day:

- Use homeroom time.
- Find time during the lunch period (see “Form a Lunch Bunch” on page 35).
- Choose a time normally used for classroom routines.
- Schedule time as necessary. (If my homeroom time wasn't enough, we met at lunchtime, too.)

Conduct Morning Meetings

Morning meetings are a wonderful way to build community in a classroom. Generally considered a gathering for lower grades, many

schools find the meetings rewarding and use them throughout the grades. Here are the typical components of a morning meeting:

- **Greeting:** Even though you have already greeted your students at the door, the meeting is a great way to greet them again and offer a welcome to the day.
- **Sharing:** Students have an opportunity to share something in their lives and give classmates a chance to ask questions.
- **Group activity:** The beginning of the year is a great time for a “getting to know each other” activity. My favorite is “A River Runs Through Us,” which was introduced to me decades ago at a workshop I attended. I have used it in my classrooms and my workshops ever since. Here are the steps:
 1. Chairs are arranged in a tight circle, with no spaces in between.
 2. Students sit in the chairs, and the teacher stands in the middle of the circle.
 3. The teacher begins with, “Hi, I’m Miss (or Ms., Mr., Mrs.) _____.”
 4. Students respond with, “Hi, Miss _____.”
 5. The teacher continues with personal content, such as “I have a dog . . . and a river runs through us.”
 6. At this point, all students who also have a dog must get up from their seat and find an open seat to sit in. At the same time, the teacher tries to grab a seat.
 7. The person left standing goes to the middle, introduces herself, and makes a statement.

Students at all grade levels enjoy this activity. We play until I am sure all students have been in the middle and shared something about themselves. By the time the activity is over, I know everyone’s name and some things we have in common, making future interactions (like 2×10) much easier.

- **Announcements:** This segment could include mention of special events like an assembly or anything else that has come up and needs to be shared.

Form a Lunch Bunch

Many middle and high schools don't allow enough time for a morning meeting. Schedules can be tight, and classes may be short. As an alternative, meeting for a few minutes at lunch or having lunch with students has worked well at some schools. As a middle school teacher, I had a very short homeroom period. As I mentioned previously, I ate lunch in the cafeteria with my students on Fridays. Doing so gave me a chance to check in with them to find out who was looking forward to the weekend, how they felt about their class work or assessments that week, and whether they needed to talk later about anything specific. It was really one of the best opportunities for me to connect with my students.

Nurture Relationships

Cook and his colleagues (2018) at the University of Minnesota conducted a study of classrooms in which teachers used a series of techniques centered on establishing, maintaining, and restoring relationships. The original study was done with 220 4th and 5th graders, and it was repeated with middle school students. The results showed that academic engagement increased by 33 percent and disruptive behavior decreased by 75 percent—outcomes that resulted in more quality, uninterrupted classroom time. The establish-maintain-restore (EMR) method breaks relationships into three steps: starting and establishing, maintenance to avoid deterioration, and repair to fix any breakdown. Strategies recommended at each step include the following:

Starting and Establishing

- Offer positive greetings at the door (as described in this chapter).
- Ask open-ended and reflective questions.
- Incorporate student-led activities.
- Make time for one-on-one encounters (as in the 2×10 strategy).

Maintenance

- Check in with students regularly.
- Recognize good behavior.
- Keep interactions positive.

I like to add Stephen Covey's ways to make deposits in emotional bank accounts:

- Keep commitments.
- Attend to the little things.
- Clarify expectations.

Repairing and Restoring

- Avoid holding mistakes over students' heads.
- Criticize behavior, not the student.
- Take responsibility for your part of the problem.
- Work with those affected—face up.
- Make things right—fix up.
- Change behavior—follow up.

The process of relationship building, maintaining, and repairing comes in many different forms. Letting students get to know you is the first step.

Every Student Has a Story

Sarah, the teacher in the opening scenario, tried many of the strategies discussed in this chapter. She found the 2×10 strategy to be very effective. Even with 150 students, she found that kids talk,

and as she spent those few minutes each day with one student, that student told his friends. The perception of her not caring changed.

We live our lives in relationships. As we work with students, sometimes it's hard to remember that they are not there to *give us* a hard time; rather, *they are having* a hard time. Some of them have come from situations that have wired their brains for stress. They may perceive new and unfamiliar situations as a threat. All students need is one caring adult in their lives to make a difference. We need to know and use positive ways to respond when addressing situations. The following are some if/then statements to consider.

| If... | Then... |
|---|--|
| You want to build relationships, | Build trust, speak respectfully, and call students by name. |
| You want to build trust, | Make eye contact, follow through, use their names, and go the extra mile. |
| You want to improve behavior, | Use the relationship you have to speak to students, create a contract, or say something like “That’s not the behavior I see from _____ [insert name]. The _____ I know is kind. Is there something you want to tell me?” |
| You want to improve academic achievement, | Make students feel that they belong. |
| You need to repair relationships, | Take responsibility for your part in the breakdown. |

| If... | Then... |
|--|---|
| You want students to feel like they belong, | Show each child that you respect them as well as like them and their differences. |
| You need to start at the beginning with a student, | Start with a smile, add a greeting, and share your own story. |



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Marilee Sprenger is an international educational consultant in the fields of social-emotional learning, literacy, vocabulary, and brain research. She was a classroom teacher for 25 years, mainly at the middle school level. In 1992, she trained and traveled with author and brain-based-learning educator Eric Jensen and discovered her love for the brain. She has authored 13 books related to the brain, learning, and memory; written numerous articles; and developed DVDs, webinars, quick reference guides, and online courses available through ASCD. Her keynote and workshop competence makes her a sought-after speaker for schools, districts, educational service centers, regional offices of education, and educational conferences. Sprenger is a member of the American Academy of Neurology. You can reach her through her website, marileesprenger.com, e-mail brainlady@gmail.com, or on Twitter @MarileeSprenger.

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At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers appear in parentheses).

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Attack of the Teenage Brain! Understanding and Supporting the Weird and Wonderful Adolescent Learner by John Medina (#118024)

Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom (Quick Reference Guide) by Kristin Souers and Pete Hall (#QRG118054)

Developing Growth Mindsets: Principles and Practices for Maximizing Students' Potential by Donna Wilson and Marcus Conyers (#120033)

Engage the Brain: How to Design for Learning That Taps into the Power of Emotion by Allison Posey (#119015)

How to Teach So Students Remember, 2nd Edition by Marilee Sprenger (#118016)

Learning That Sticks: A Brain-Based Model for Instructional Design and Delivery by Bryan Goodwin, Tonia Gibson, and Kristin Rouleau (#120032)

Mindfulness in the Classroom: Strategies for Promoting Concentration, Compassion, and Calm by Thomas Armstrong (#120018)

Relationship, Responsibility, and Regulation: Trauma-Invested Practices for Fostering Resilient Learners by Kristin Van Marter Souers with Pete Hall (#119027)

Research-Based Strategies to Ignite Student Learning: Insights from Neuroscience and the Classroom, Revised and Expanded Edition by Judy Willis and Malana Willis (#120029)

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Teaching the Adolescent Brain DVD with Facilitator's Guide (#606050)

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