

BUILD TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

OVERVIEW

What it Means

Build Trusting Relationships

To build trusting relationships, teachers need to build rapport, engage families, practice reciprocal vulnerability, and employ trauma-informed practices, among other practices. This requires intentional effort to create learning environments where students feel safe, valued, respected, and supported. Educators create opportunities to engage with learners, getting to know them as people, both inside and outside of these learning environments. When educators understand and integrate a focus on the context that they and the learners bring to the learning task, they build the foundation for trusting relationships.

This is a shared process for all educators and learners that is strengthened through attention to context, and ongoing reflection, modeling, and mutual feedback.

Context

Educator Context

Teacher educators: Model and scaffold relationship-building strategies in their coursework and field placements so that candidates learn how to know students (and their contexts) as individuals.

Classroom teachers: Prioritize getting to know each student's cultural, social, and emotional background, and invest time in building rapport and safety before jumping into content.

Educational leaders: Create structures and practices at the university, school, or district level (e.g., mentoring, collaborative meetings, family-engagement routines) that model these practices and support staff in forming trusting relationships with students and families

Why it Matters

Facilitates Academic Success & Effective Teaching

Positive teacher-student relationships promote deeper learning, encourage persistence with challenging tasks, and improve academic achievement by enhancing students' cognitive, emotional, and social engagement. Conversely, negative relationships hinder engagement and achievement (Merritt et al., 2012; Sauve & Schonert-Reichl, 2019; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014; Roorda et al., 2017). Teachers with well-developed social, emotional, and cultural competencies develop more positive relationships with students and these relationships are foundational to effective teaching (Jones et al., 2013).

Supports Resilience and Thriving

Warm, caring relationships act as protective factors against trauma, stress, and adversity, creating a safe and supportive environment where students can thrive socially, emotionally, and academically (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017).

Builds Safe, Brave, and Supportive Learning Spaces

Intentional relationship-building establishes the foundation for a positive school climate, which supports student attendance, motivation, and collaboration (Osher & Berg, 2017; National School Climate Center, 2021).

Promotes Equity in Teaching and Learning

All students, especially those from marginalized groups, including those from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and students with learning disabilities, benefit significantly from caring relationships, as they mitigate the harms of bias and negative teacher perceptions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019).



- What does a trusting relationship look like for you?
- How do you build trusting relationships with students or colleagues?
- What supports this work – and what gets in the way?



[The Power of Vulnerability](#)
Brené Brown, TED Talk



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RESOURCES & TOOLS

Research

Evidence for Building Trusting Relationships

- Kim, S., Crooks, C. V., Bax, K., & Shokoohi, M. (2021). Impact of trauma-informed training and mindfulness-based social-emotional learning program on teacher attitudes and burnout: A mixed-methods study. *School Mental Health*, 13(1), 55-68. [Start by identifying your mission.](#)
- Nappa, L., & Hsieh, T. Y. (2025). Collegial relationships as a vehicle for adult SEL: Educator relationships and the development of adult social and emotional competencies. *Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy*, 5, 100099.
- R.M. van der Lans, J. Cremers, I. Klugkist, R. Zwart, Teachers' interpersonal relationships and instructional expertise: How are they related? *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, Volume 66, 2020. [van der Lans et al., 2020](#).
- Sauve, J. A., & Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2019). Creating caring classroom and school communities: Lessons learned from social and emotional learning programs and practices. In J. Fredricks, A. L. Reschly, & S. L. Christenson (Eds.), *The handbook of student interventions: Working with disengaged youth* (pp. 209-225). Elsevier.
- Whitehead, J. (2022, April). Calm, clear, and kind: What students want from their teachers. Greater Good Science Center. Students define caring teachers as calm, clear, and kind, and the Calm, Clear, and Kind (CCK) framework can benefit both students and teacher well-being.

Practice

Strategies

- [Iceberg Self-Reflection Activity](#) – Group/Partner activity – CRTWC, 2024
- [What's in a Name Activity](#) – Learning for Justice, 2021
- [Core Values Exercise](#) – CRTWC Activity (inspired by Elena Aguilar's *Onward Workbook*), 2018
- [Empathy Mapping Exercise](#) – Edutopia
- [Trauma-Aware Teaching Checklist](#) – Karen Costa, 100 Faculty, 2023
- [Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#) – The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2025
- [The Heart of Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success](#) – Wolpow et al., 2009
- [Family Engagement Tools](#) – Common Sense Education

Case Studies

- [From Safe to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice](#) – Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens, 2013 ★ Used in TEI 2024

Inspiration



Inspiring Reads

- [How Trauma Affects Kids in School](#) – Child Mind Institute
 - Signs of trauma and tips for helping kids who've been traumatized. (2022)
- [Teachers Need Trauma-Informed Care, Too](#) – Edutopia
 - Many teachers deal with chronic stress and trauma. These strategies help foster adult well-being. (2021)
- [Trauma-Informed Practices for Educators](#) – Learning Forward
 - Tips and strategies to help educators respond to trauma and support well-being at school. (2020)
- [Creating Safety Through Vulnerability](#) – Learning for Justice
 - This teacher's choice to be vulnerable with her students transformed the learning experience. (2021)

Inspiring Videos

- [The Power of Relationships in Schools](#) – Edutopia, 2019
- [Getting Started with Trauma-Informed Practices](#) – Edutopia, 2019 ★ Used in TEI 2024