

# LIFE-SUCCESS lessons and conversations

## Chapter 1: Building relationship with young people

Mark Le Messurier – March, 2017

One of the most satisfying experiences for relational educators is the opportunity to deliberately build humane connections with young people, and between them. We've learnt that there's so much more to teaching than simply imparting quality curriculum. Professor Maurice Galton in his book, 'Learning and Teaching in the Primary Classroom' alerts us that schools can very easily become lonely and isolating places for both children and adolescents (Galton, 2007). His advice is to work hard to ensure every student has a friend or two within the first month. Not only is friendship critical for good mental health, but it is the best predictor of engagement in learning that we know of. The answer to the question; "Why help students build friendships in the first few weeks of school?" is patently transparent. If we want young people to achieve academically, feel happier and be more malleable, then it's all about creating connections that are likely to lead to friendships early on.

This chapter contains an assortment of ideas, activities and conversations to build relationship with students of all ages. Offered playfully and open heartedly, these activities will enrich the atmosphere of care and trust you are intending to grow in your classrooms. They are grouped into three categories;

1. designs to kick-start relationship with students
2. activities to inspire group unity
3. ideas to restore damaged relationships

### **Designs to kick-start relationships with students**

#### **First contact**

The quality of a first interaction is the one that becomes imprinted in our social and emotional memory, and is crucial. It doesn't take children and adolescents long to get a sense of your emotional character and decide whether they will trust and enjoy you, or react and challenge you. At a basic level those of us who deliberately smile and laugh with students in the right moment, or deliver a wink, pull a silly face, offer a dare, a friendly eye roll, a joke, a thumbs up or a reassuring comment raise connections to new heights. Instantly, students sense our safety and intention to bond.

#### **Prepare**

The best way to set up a successful first interaction is to prepare for it. Rather than winging it, think about a couple of well-considered ideas that will add value to this very first encounter.

#### **Being your kindest self**

Think about your style and how to present it to children. Be brave and put your own stamp on the way you do things. Treat every student with kindness, patience and gentleness. Remember, those students who you 'feel' least deserve your best self, need it the most.

Some argue that young adolescents, are less interested in connecting with educators. I hold a contrasting opinion. I see this as a vulnerable time where many rapid developmental changes are occurring. These changes impact on self-esteem, self-image, study habits and socialisation with peers. There are online, as well as face to face moments, of having to deal with struggles concerning intimidation, upsets with friends, feelings of loss and isolation, let alone the inevitable disputes at home with parents. These obvious developmental aspects demand a need for caring adults to be available and willing to communicate openly with students. Most kids crave the 'human stuff' from us, and to get it they'll play to push buttons to see the full range of our emotions. Not because they dislike us, but because they're inviting our colour, life, attitude and authenticity into their lives. They are relationship driven, and are looking for adults who grasp that our best work is always done inside relationships with young people. Human connectedness is a forerunner to setting the

scene for better learning, as well as a protective factor against alienation, intimidation, discrimination and violence. Here lies one of our biggest challenges in schools; a different way for educators to feel, behave and be with students.

And, for those children and adolescents who've been victims to trauma or deep emotional disturbances, our consistency tells them they've just found a gem that can be counted on. Our open-heartedness and emotional consistency allows them to feel safe and find who they can be.

### **Smile with your eyes and mouth**

A smile is a powerful thing. It quickly builds trust and signals the release of neurotransmitters like endorphins, dopamine, and mood-enhancing serotonin that make people feel good. Giving a genuine smile to someone you've just met is a great way to disarm trepidation and quickly build a positive relationship.

### **Listen**

Disciplined listeners are aware of what their body language is telling others. They show interest by leaning into the conversation, nodding their head to emphasise understanding or agreement, they'll openly validate a person's feelings and ask questions for clarification. It's the difference between promoting respect or leaving another feeling short-changed. The art of poised listening isn't arduous. It really comes down to the interest one has in another, and the drive to build a strong relationship with this person.

### **Strengthen relationship with your body language**

To quickly spark a relationship, you want your body to match your optimistic words. We do this by gently opening and presenting three key areas of our body: the nape of the neck, the tummy area and the upper legs. Try not to block or cover these with your hands. And, without being fake, the research alerts us to a helpful fact. That is, when we subtly mirror the posture and actions of the person we're with, we quickly build rapport. Careful; don't overdo it.

### **Use touch wisely**

Research shows that most people appreciate being lightly touched during an interaction. A brief and gentle touch on the arm suggests warmth and is a physical reminder of the relationship you are keen to build. Be careful not to overdo it, and keep in mind that touch is not considered appropriate in certain cultures and situations.

### **Immediately engage**

Deliberately greet students. Move towards the individual, or the group, with a "good morning" or "good afternoon" or "it's good to see you" or "It's always great to see you!" Let them know that you're happy to be with them. Develop a consciousness to stamp an optimistic attitude into your environment right from the start of the day! Take a moment to watch this year 5 teacher in North Carolina meet each student with an elaborate, personalised handshake (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNjt5sC05dk>). It might not be your style, but I admire it. It reflects that he's spent time with each student, and together, they've developed a few special moves that represent their relationship and sparks a little energy between them.

### **Commit to the moment**

Try to "present" when you're with your student, students, or anyone for that matter. As much as you can, train yourself to let go of what's happened earlier, or being a victim to too many chaotic thoughts. A 'being in the moment' kind of connection is a gift that kids, teens and adults alike will remember about you in years to come. Rarely will they remember what you've said, but your optimistic spirit and desire to be in their lives will long be remembered.

### **Share**

Break the ice by sharing something about yourself. This encourages students to do the same. Opening up a conversation is a clear indication that you want a positive relationship. The next step is to show interest in what they are saying to you. This is a precious moment for them to educate you about who they are, how they feel and what the need.

### **Getting to know students**

Short, refreshing encounters often provide a healthy start. A good idea is to draw on icebreakers to enrich your first contacts. Ice breakers may include board games, cards, a computer game; any mutually enjoyable activity. Don't forget barrier games as they offer an engaging way to develop a student's listening and attention skills. As well, they assist the development of language and the understanding of concepts around time, space and directions. All you need is you (the speaker), your student (the listener), two sets of materials and a barrier such as a Manilla folder or big book that can stand up between you both. The aim is for the speaker to arrange their materials behind the barrier while talking to the listener how to position their materials in exactly the same way. When completed, the barrier is removed and both the

speaker and the listener should have their materials positioned the same. You can use; miniature objects, small toy animals or figures, sticker sets, picture cards from games, coloured pencils and paper, maths materials, Lego and even draw pictures together. Just google barrier games, or look on Pinterest. There are zillions of ideas for all ages! Here are a few of my favourite 'getting to know you' games I use when working individually with kids, or in groups;

**ACTIVITY; *hang the nail*** - run a tight string between two chairs or desks. The goal is to hang twenty flat head nails from the string working cooperatively together. It provides the scope to simply chat as fingers stay busy.

**ACTIVITY; *suck it up*** - the idea is to suck up one small paper sheet (small 'post it note' size) with a straw and transfer it from one pile to another. To start with try just three or four, with you demonstrating first. Soon increase the number of paper sheets to be transferred and eventually, as you get to know one another, let it become competitive!

**ACTIVITY; *knock out*** - purchase a small pair of women's nylon tights and cut them in half so you have the two legs. Place a tennis ball into the foot of each leg. Place two bottles of water some distance away on the floor. Swing the nylon tight around to build a little momentum. When ready let it go so it's able to knock over one bottle of water. Give that bottle to your student as a gift. Next ask the student to knock the second bottle of water over for you. This is so much fun as it's tricky to control the ball!

#### **ACTIVITY; *student to student interviews***

Break students into pairs. You may choose to do this randomly, or strategically so certain students are placed together. Ask them to face their partner and discuss the things they 'like to do'; a hobby, an interest, a passion, a talent, a skill, a special experience, a personal strength, a dream they might be chasing or a favourite book or movie. Also encourage them to chat about things they 'do not like'; a fear, a dislike, a worry, something annoying or a bad experience. Their task is to find one distinctive difference between each other, and one thing they have in common. Other valuable topics include; 'I wish I had...', 'What makes me happy is...', 'The best thing I ever...', 'I dream to...' or 'My best memory is when...'.

#### **ACTIVITY; *stringing conversations together***

Cut string into pieces of different lengths. Each piece should have a matching piece the same length. There should be enough pieces so each student will have one. Then give each student one piece of string, and challenge them to find the other student who has a string the same length. Once students find their matches, they can take turns introducing themselves to one another. You can provide a list of questions to help students "break the ice". You can extend the activity by having each student introduce their partner to the class.

#### **ACTIVITY; *what about you?***

Simply write one of the questions below on a piece of laminated card, so each student has one. Before they enter the room place them on the desks. Then, as they walk in to take their seat they'll spot it on their desk. Watch their face light up with a smile as they see the question. While the temptation is to give each student a different question, it is fascinating listening to the range of responses from the one question! Questions;

What is one surprising thing about you?

On a scale of 1-10, how strict are your parents?

Who has been your favourite teacher? Why?

If you could only choose one, would you choose; being so good looking, a genius, famous for doing something great or yourself?

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

Name someone you admire.

What are you proud of?

What's the most beautiful place you've ever been?

What are your 3 favourite movies?

Tell me a great or weird memory you have from kindergarten.

What would you do if you were invisible for a day?

If you could time travel, where would you go?

If you could live inside any TV show, what would it be?

Would you rather live for a week in the past or the future? Why?

What's your best childhood memory?

If you could eat only 3 foods for the rest of your life, what would they be?

If you could be a cartoon character for a week, who would you be?

Ask me 2 questions?

What's the bravest thing you've ever done?

When you're having a bad day, what do you do to make yourself feel better?

Use one word to describe your family?

What's the one food you would never, ever eat?

Do you ever count your steps when you walk?

Would you like to pick a new name for yourself? What name would you pick?

Would you rather be the most popular kid in school or the smartest kid in school?

These are also excellent to ease into, or to finish off lessons with kids. The rise in energy and heightened relationship during these activities remind us that we are wired for social connection. We are social creatures and when the connection occurs, there's a deep difference to our wellbeing. When we're with people we like, with people who like us, with people who encourage and believe in us; we grow!

### **Name rich environments**

An educator, coach or leader who takes the time to learn their students' names is immediately thought of as interested and approachable. When we use a young person's name, it shows that we care about their success and want to develop a trusting relationship. Equally important is helping students to learn the names of their classmates as it's fundamental to develop a sense of community between students.

Here are several activities to help students learn each other's names;

#### **Mystery box**

Once the children are settled in a social circle choose someone to open the lid of the mystery box located on the floor in the centre. Inside the mystery box are the name badges for each child. Hold it up so that the child chosen can't see into it and ask them to place their hand into the box and choose a badge. If the child cannot read the name, whisper it to them. Their job is to hand it to the owner of the badge with a great smile. Give them several guesses. If they cannot find the owner of the badge they place it back into the box and a new person is chosen. Continue until all badges have been handed out.

#### **Name throw**

Arrange the children into a social circle. Gently roll a light medium sized ball to a child who is ready and looking at you. As they catch it ask them to say, "Thank you (and say your name)." Next, this child rolls the ball to another. As they receive the ball they say, "Thank you (stating the child's name that rolled it to them)." Continue until everyone has had several turns.

#### **Who's missing?**

This is a gentle and entertaining game. First, sit the group in a social circle. Ask them to close their eyes, place hands over their face and tuck their heads down. Next, quietly ask one child to leave the room. Once this child is well away, the children must guess the name of the child 'Who's missing?' When one of the children guesses the name correctly bring the missing child back to join the group, and to start a new game. Continue to play until everyone has had a turn. If you want to make it trickier, choose two or three children to leave the room at the same time!

Also, teach children that as they meet someone, try to make an association between that person's name and the name of someone else they know. To illustrate this, I recently presented with a man called Chris and his partner, Jaz. To remember their names, I immediately thought of him as the man with the same name as my brother. He had the same beautiful blue eyes! I then imagined them, as a couple, loving Jaz music. To highlight association, move from student to student and ask how they remember the names of some class members. It's good for others to see and hear this in action. Later, as 'name memory' strengthens, stand by a student and ask another if they can remember this person's name, and how they do it! Show off to your class, and go around the room calling each person's name!

While on the topic of using names, is it wise for students to use their teacher's Christian name or is this likely to undermine authority or incite anarchy? This is a philosophical matter for educators and schools to make because the respect a student holds for a teacher is earned by that teacher. Being required to formally use the teacher's surname will not create respect, collaboration or admiration.

**ACTIVITY: *make a 'Welcome Package'***

This is a fabulous idea and is only limited by imagination, but before you go ahead please discuss it with someone in leadership, and physically show them the package before you send it.

Mohammad Al-Khafaji is the CEO of 'Welcome to Australia' (<https://www.welcometoaustralia.org.au/>). This is a wonderful organisation that welcomes immigrants to Australia. Mohammad came to Australia from Iraq in 2003. At the time he was 13 years old. Mohammad tells a heart-warming story about receiving a 'Welcome Package' within the first day or two of arriving. It was an old tatty shoe box filled with an assortment of brand new stationery. Mohammad loved the stationery, but what resonated on an emotional level was the simple drawing a child had stuck on the lid. It helped him feel cared for. When he gazed at the drawing he imagined a boy or girl, possibly a bit younger than he was, drawing this as they sat with their family. Just knowing that one family in Australia understood his feelings gave him the strength to take on a brave new world.

So, before school starts, or before you start working with a particular student, send a 'Welcome Package' to them via their parent. Include information about;

- your name and star sign and what they mean
- where you live and what you like about it
- past jobs and what you like about your work now
- your family and who's in it including all the pets with photos of the pets
- how it was for you at school when you were their age
- your cars, hobbies and interests
- how many grand finals you've won single-handedly?
- if you have scars then write something about how you achieved them!
- include things you've been doing lately
- your special talent, a special experience, or favourite books or movies; pop in an appropriate dvd or short novel from the school library so they can connect with you over a shared interest
- You might even include a few special photos, a curious object or offer a cheeky dare!

As well you might ask the student and parent to come by school for a short catch up in the week before students return to school. This small connecting gesture supports students and parents to connect quickly on a more personal level to you. It also sends a clear message about your openness and desire to connect. What's more, you can adapt it in any way you like!

### **Video**

One of my 10-year-old clients received a video, via email, to his mother from his new teacher. She was unable to meet him when he had his transition visit so sent the video to catch up and introduce herself. She was aware that he had been identified with Autism and battled anxiety as well. Over 3-minutes she simply presented herself; her nickname, a little about her family, past jobs, something about her pets, hobbies and interests, her favourite books and movies, reassuring comments, what she hoped to achieve for every student in her class, as well as an invitation to catch up with her the week before students returned to school. The positive impact from 3 minutes of video was spectacular!

### **ACTIVITY; ten question biography**

A biography is a story about someone's life written by another person. Biographies can fill a book, but this one only needs to be ten sentences, and can have a little poetic licence! The idea is for students to interview each other and complete these questions. You can present this activity in several ways. In its simplest form, the questions can be the basis of a conversation. You may wish to give each student a minute to feedback the most interesting information they learnt about their partner to the class. Or, ramp it up, and ask students in a subsequent lesson to write a short biography on the person they interviewed. This activity, with all its permutations, helps to build inclusion, tolerance and acceptance. Oh? Before you ask students to begin, model this activity by answering the questions about yourself! The ten interview questions;

What is your name?

Where were you born?

Name the people in your family?

What do you like to do to have fun?

What annoys, scares or worries you?

Tell me about a time when you had to be brave?

Is there a pet you have, or would love to have?

What sort of job do you dream of doing later on?

What do you feel proud of?

What are you good at?

### **Your warm and predictable emotional tone makes a big difference**

Reflect on how you begin each day, lesson or session with students. After delivering a warm welcome, do you move to a continuing activity students enjoy to help ease them into the learning task? It may be a group activity such as mindfulness colouring in which presents the scope for students to chat, connect, open up and share feelings. Do you continue to read a story? A story can be a soothing tool as it allows children to adjust emotionally to a new situation.

Good educators will tell you that teaching and practicing the kind of routines you want does deliver benefits. So, from the outset invest time to show how things will work. Every process has to be taught, modelled and reinforced to help guarantee a predictable and safe learning environment. An assuredness about what to expect and when to expect it, is something most of us treasure. It gives every human being an edge to;

- know what to do right now
- understand what's coming up
- feel more capable, independent and confident
- And, feel more relaxed, cooperative and flexible

A predictable routine is worth ten times the value for the children with Autism spectrum disorder and for those who battle anxiety. Without devising structured ways for them to know what happening, we're inadvertently setting these kids up for stress, and ourselves up for disorder. Also, avoid displaying unpredictable emotions and behaviours because they worry and push kids away and will inspire opposition in some of the others.

### **When students are away**

If a student is absent for a few days, and you feel it's appropriate, make a phone call or send an email or text. Doing this, through their parent, lets them know they are missed and belong to the group.

### **Praise captures the behaviours you want**

As you praise a genuinely praiseworthy moment you instantly capture the behaviour you value. This marks a moment that says to another, "I'm paying attention. You're on track. I value what you're doing and that works!" This is the basis positive behaviour change in action. Back in 2006 Stanford University psychologist, Carol Dweck, popularised the term 'growth mindset'. She helped us to understand that when praise is delivered in the right way many aspects of a child's growth is enhanced. Capturing and giving praise to others can be an elusive act for many adults as it runs counter to what they experienced in their early years. So work on delivering it warmly, succinctly and about the action or effort. Praise children in the same way you'd praise a close, intelligent friend. Praise is priceless. It highlights to students they are meeting expectations and most kids want to succeed and want our approval. And, be mindful that some children respond much better to praise that quiet or private, rather than being loud or public.

### **Manage the emotions and behaviours of students by teaching them skills**

Punishment was once the backbone of student control in schools. Today anything that resembles a time-out, detention, suspension or isolation is being quickly dropped from good schools. Instead, schools with a strong social/emotional bias are providing positive opportunities for students to take a break, meditate and wind down in purposeful ways. We are learning that nearly any experience can be meditative and support strengthening self-regulation; a bike ride, walking and talking, gardening, writing poetry, square breathing, buddy breathing, paper cup blowing, drawing or colouring in while chatting or any practice that offers quiet time to connect with one's own feelings. The goal is to assist students to calm, reflect, learn and reengage with dignity. This is highlighted by the emergence of 'positive education' that focusses on building emotionally safe classrooms and schools, teaching students skills, continuously coaching them to use new skills and improving relationships between everyone. We now understand that anything to do with managing the tricky behaviour of students must be framed within a healthy social and emotional context.

### **Build evidence that your care**

Let the behaviours you display in front of students be proof of your care. Allow them to take away a deep sense of faith and security in you to tell their parents, friends and other teachers. Let them talk about your warmth, openness, care, humour, exquisite skill to teach curriculum, calmness and friendliness. Make the respect you treat them with extraordinarily tangible so they really do have something to talk about behind your back! This is the moment to reflect on three things you'd like your students to say about you behind your back, to their friends, to parents or to other teachers.

### **ACTIVITY; what do I say and do to build relationships with children**

This is a relationship building exercise for educators. Ideally, do it in groups of three or four with your staff. Spend four lots of three minutes rapidly brainstorming the questions below. Have four sheets of paper for each group with one of the questions written at the top of each page ready for them to record their answers.

Question 1. What can we do that builds 'positive relationships' with students?

*(Rapidly record 5 things - 3 minutes)*

Question 2. What can we say that builds 'positive relationships' with students?

*(Rapidly record 5 things - 3 minutes)*

Question 3. What might we do that is likely to result in damaging our relationship with students?

*(Rapidly record 5 things - 3 minutes)*

Question 4. What might we say that is likely to result in damaging our relationship with students?

*(Rapidly record 5 things - 3 minutes)*

Next, spend 10 minutes, sharing outcomes with the larger staff group. Encourage group members to speak freely as this is an activity where a lot is said and can be invisibly absorbed by those who will be most advantaged.

### **ACTIVITY; what do I say and do to build relationships with you**

If you're daring, and I'd encourage you to be, the activity and take it to your students. In this case, the questions might be reworded as;

1. What do I say and do that tells you I want a great relationship with you? Is it enough?
2. What else should I be saying that tells you I want the best for you?
3. What should I be doing more of so you feel the best you can about me, and about your learning?

This is an effective way to receive direct feedback from students. And, the bonus here is that your students get to see and hear you reaching out to them and wanting to improve their experience.

### **The layout of your teaching/ learning space**

One of the best ways for students to feel welcome is to deliberately create an inviting teaching/learning space. Look around and review yours. Is it safe, comfortable and inviting for students? Does it offer portable technologies, a little privacy and flexibility? Is it well lit, warm in winter and cool in summer? If your space doesn't naturally have these things think how you might provide an improved edge. One way for students to feel like the space is theirs is to help you decorate it and add their stamp. There's nothing like walking into a teaching/learning space where things have a place, that makes sense and feels visually tranquil. Winston Churchill, Britain's celebrated World War Two Prime minister, often made remarkable observations about life. One of his pearls was, "We shape our dwellings, and afterwards they shape us."

### **Provide structure, procedures and predictability**

When these occur, students know what to expect, how to get organised and can be prepared; physically and emotionally. Being offered the gift of routine is a great asset to all students, and is literally life-saving for those dealing with Autism spectrum disorder, anxiety, ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, language disorder, memory issues, executive dysfunction and so on.

### **Opportunity to learn**

Common sense and research inform us that children learn best when surrounded by respectable behaviour from their peers. More than this, children and adolescents tell us they need a classroom where they feel safe, can build genuine friendships and learn (<https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/2015/08/26/iser-research-inspiration-for-edinburgh-fringe-show-on-children-s-happiness>). Nothing is more frustrating than being in a class with a teacher who can't teach because they're continually at their wits end dealing with too much unruly behaviour from one student or more.

### **Change it up - catch up with students outside of the classroom**

Do you still sit and laugh with students? Do you make a point of having lunch with them sometimes and chat? Do you sometimes hand out stickers, badges, pens, certificates or vouchers to students in the yard as you capture positive moments between them? How long since you joined in a game with students and broke the 'teacher stereotype' by becoming a friendly and awkward learner while they coach you? It's refreshing to see each other in a completely different light!

## ACTIVITY; a survey 'about me'

The survey 'about me' is an enjoyable way to appreciate more about each other. This is a favourite of mine, and it's easy to use with a student, with several students, or an entire class. The questions provide a springboard to delve a little deeper into their world, to understand the way they see and feel about a range of significant elements and how they impact on them.

And, be sure to do this with a twist - that is, for every question you ask the group, or a student, dare them to ask you the very same question back! One of the best ways to establish a meaningful bond is to let them see more than just the professional part of your personality. As we open up and let others learn more about us, there's a better chance of connecting on a personal level and building stronger relationships.

You can record responses if you wish, or you can treat these few pages as a way to prompt discussion. Free flowing discussion with a class or an individual often reveals insightful glimpses. Dig a little deeper, past the bravado and past the superficiality of behaviour. Learn what inspires them? If they had a magic wand, what would they want to change about themselves, school, home or their life? Here's a perfect way to find out.

## ACTIVITY; life boxes

Begin by asking each student to hand-pick a box, about 30 centimetres by 30 centimetres. Give them encouragement, time and resources to decorate it with photographs, paint, texta, craypas crayons, paper mache to represent what is meaningful to them; their personality, family, interests or hopes.

Once done, ask students to take their life box home and fill it with bits and pieces that are significant or expressive of them. They might include individual and family photos or special event photos, music and movie play lists, a ballet shoe, karate grading belts, a scout badge, other significant photos, trophies, a bike helmet, a rock, crystal or mineral, a very special pet's collar, favourite colours and so much more! Once their box is filled ask your students to bring them back to school ready to do a three-minute presentation about themselves. It's a good idea that you model the activity first. In fact, I suggest you do this at the very beginning when you first give out the 'life boxes'. Not only does this help to tune students into the potentials surrounding the activity, but it allows them to see you as a real person with a real life too! This is one of those activities that adds better understandings and results in an easiness between students.

## Reaching out for feedback

Mutual feedback invites each of us to contemplate a different perspective, to tap into our blind spots and strive closer to our potential. As educators, there are two aspects of feedback to consider. First, there's feedback we provide to students and parents, and we've learnt the significance of providing truckloads of it phrased constructively to promote relationship and growth. Then, there's feedback we invite from students and parents about our own performance. This helps us to understand if we are meeting their needs, and what more we could be doing.

## ACTIVITY; a getting to know you survey

Start the year by asking students, with the support of their parents, 'What do you think will help your learning and happiness here at school?' Why not send home this survey that asks for information to get off to the best start? Let parents and students know that there are no right or wrong answers because the answers are about themselves. Allow them to present information as an electronic product or by filling out the questions in the survey sheet and stapling the pages together. After all, parents have a wealth of knowledge about their children, and it is to our advantage to tap into it.

It's also a wise idea to read reports and assessments before meeting students, and let parents know you've done this very early on. Competent professionals build on the judgements and opinions of those who have worked with students previously. Never shy away from supplying your school email address to parents or making a point of gathering the email addresses of parents. This reassures parents that communication is welcomed. Once you've got started with a class, wait a few weeks and send a light-hearted note home to parents explaining how their child has settled in. Be sure to write several snippets that illustrate the student's personal, social and



academic accomplishments. This inspires confidence! Some teachers take the time to send home 'First Day Success Certificate' and this is worthwhile for many connecting reasons.

### **ACTIVITY; student feedback survey - an update**

Then, as the term ends, send home a feedback survey for students to fill out with their parent, parents or caregiver. Asking for feedback highlights your quality of care.

### **Other bright ideas to gather feedback include;**

- finding private moments to ask students how they're going and if you can help
- encourage parents to check in with you
- create class newsletters
- send home uplifting work samples
- write inspiring notes in the diary
- make a celebratory phone call to parents
- text or send emails
- send 'happy notes' home
- send a helpful article or website
- send home certificates and awards
- hold father/ son evenings
- hold mother/ daughter evenings
- hold 'grand friends' days
- offer extra interviews
- offer specialised plans
- continue to chat and to be available

## **Change-ups to inspire group unity**

Never forget the value of change-ups or energisers! These are a set of handy activities, lasting from a few seconds to a few minutes, to steer your group in the direction you wish to go. They can be employed to redirect attention, to tighten relationships, brighten the mood, to lift the concentration of a group or to build unity. They are also brilliant little life savers capable of repairing the emotional fallout following an unpleasant incident. The benefit of smiling, giggling, laughing and sharing lighter moments together reduces tension and rediscovers happiness. As we laugh, our muscles work hard. Then, as we stop laughing our muscles relax and we feel more relaxed and connected to the others around us. The truth is that the maintenance of group emotion and connections is a never-ending process.

My best advice is to develop a collection of favourites that you know work, and then gradually expand your repertoire. A wonderful source of energisers and mood lifts lives with your students. Just ask them what they know and have experienced in the past. The intention is far from being simply frivolous. This activity is a shrewd way to protect students against feelings of isolation, disengagement and defeat. Here are a few of my favourites and feel free to adapt them to suit your group.

**ACTIVITY; mine field** - at the heart of this game is positive communication. Let the group watch as you scatter books or magazines over the floor. They are the mines. Next, arrange participants into pairs. Choose a pair to begin while the others watch on. The idea is that one of the pair becomes a trusted guide and the other is blindfolded. Once blindfolded, spin the player around several times to disorient them slightly, then the game begins! At this point the guide may not touch their partner, and may only use words to guide his or her partner safely through the minefield. If the blind folded player stumbles on to a mine the pair must go back to the start. The idea is for the blindfolded person to make it to the other side unharmed.

**ACTIVITY; draw me if you can** - place students into pairs. A few groups of three will work too. One (or 2 if it's a group of 3) assign themselves as the 'communicator(s)'. The other is the 'drawer'. 'Communicators' get to look at a line drawing you prepared earlier, on a large sheet of paper. The first time you do this activity make the line drawing fairly simple. You'll be surprised how quickly you can ramp up the degree of difficulty. The idea is that the 'communicator(s)' can see the line drawing you're holding, but the 'drawer' can't. They must have their backs to you and keep their eyes on their page. The 'communicator' can talk as much as they like to help the 'drawer' draw it. 'Communicators' must keep their hands behind their backs – all they can do is talk and talk to help the 'drawer' draw the picture as accurately as possible. Restarts are permitted. Later, if you want to increase the level of difficulty, play with the 'communicator' and the 'drawer' sitting back to back so the 'communicator' cannot see what the 'drawer' is drawing and the drawer must listen and draw without correction.

**ACTIVITY; Chinese whispers**

Ideally, sit everyone in a circle. Whisper a phrase or a sentence into the ear of a student. Make the sentence more complex for older students. The first student whispers the phrase to the next, and in turn, the whisper travels from one to another around the circle. The last person to receive the message announces what they've heard. Rarely is it the same phrase or sentence that began!

**ACTIVITY; sleeping pirate**

All students, except the sleeping pirate, sit in a circle on the floor. The sleeping pirate is blind folded and sits cross legged in the middle of the circle guarding a large bunch of keys, or similar, that are on the floor close by. A student is silently nominated to creep up and take the keys away from the pirate. They try to return to their place in the circle and place the keys on the floor behind their back without the pirate hearing anything at all. The sleeping pirate listens intently, but says nothing. Next, the group says, "Wake up pirate, someone's got your keys." The pirate removes their blindfold and has three attempts to find the raider. If the raider is successful, they become the pirate in the next round.

**ACTIVITY; alphabet list game**

Firstly, create a scenario such as, "Today we are all going to the zoo and we'll see aardvarks." The next person follows on saying, "Today we are all going to the zoo and we'll see aardvarks and baboons." The next might say, "Today we are all going to the zoo and we will see aardvarks, baboons and cats." As you can see each student builds an animal onto the list following alphabetical order. It is part of the game to have each new player repeat all the items on the list, and then add their new item. If they forget an item, or get the order wrong, they are out. Alternatively, you may choose to play the game without having winners and losers, and allow the group to assist anyone who needs help. Continue until everyone has had a turn. Other examples of the Alphabet list game are;

"Today we are all going camping and need to take..."

"Today we are all going the supermarket and need to buy..."

**ACTIVITY; "I went to the shop and I bought a...."**

To begin you might say to the group, "I went to the shop and I bought carrots. Who'd like to come shopping with me? Tell me what you will buy?" To come shopping with you they must work out the theme you have in mind. The theme here is that you are in a green grocery shop, so if a student answers, "I'd like to buy apples." Then, you'd reply, "Yes, you can come shopping with me!" On the other hand, if they said, "I'd like to buy Lego." Then, you'd reply, "Sorry, you can't come shopping with me!" Continue from person to person until someone is able to tell you the theme. Themes might include;

Electronic shop theme – TV, iPad, sound bar, phone, etc.

Animal theme – lion, dog, rat, possum, kangaroo, snake, etc.

Green things theme – a tree, zucchini, paint, a bush for the garden, envy, etc.

Plants theme – rose bush, herbs, groundcover, tree, a new geranium, etc.

Stationery shop theme – newspaper, gift, birthday card, wrapping paper, etc.

Homeware shop theme – plates, cups, knife, chopping board, tongs, spoons, glasses, etc.

Butcher theme – chicken, minced meat, steak, sausages beef, etc.,

Coffee shop theme – a hot chocolate, cake, biscuits, tea, coffee, etc.

Toy shop theme – board game, card game, Lego, a soft toy, a Spiderman suit, etc.

**ACTIVITY; Kim's memory game**

This simple memory game is age old. On a tray, place six to sixteen small items. As students get older be sure to increase the number of items. Cover with a cloth. To begin, sit everyone in a circle. Place the tray in the middle of the circle and

remove the cloth for one minute. At this point allow students to chat as they try to remember the objects on the tray. When one minute has lapsed replace the cloth to cover the items. Ask students, one at a time, to name an item they think was on the tray. Record their responses and once they've exhausted their memories remove the cloth again and check what's on the tray against the list just built.

**ACTIVITY; *can you guess?***

Place a small interesting item onto a tray and cover it with a large thick towel. Select a person to slide their hands under the towel to feel the object. Ask them to take a guess as to what the object might be. If they are unsuccessful they finish their turn and choose someone new. When someone finally guesses correctly allow them to keep the item. Be sure to include fascinating items such as cold jelly, rice, flour, slippery banana, yoghurt, shredded cheese, mashed strawberries and anything else with an interesting texture, feel or smell.

**ACTIVITY; *silent Ball***

This one works for any age group and it's a quick game that revitalises. Have students stand. Engage eye contact with a student and throw a beanbag or a soft ball at the student's chest. Once the student has caught the ball they engage eye contact with someone new and throw it directly to them. When a student misses the catch they are out of the game. They return to their seat and return the ball to the previous thrower. The last two or three students standing.

**ACTIVITY; *pass the parcel***

Wrap a small toy, a piece of stationery, a sweet or an inexpensive gift in about ten layers of white paper. If you pride yourself on presentation, then use gift paper as your last layer. Write a message on each layer, such as; hop on one foot sixteen times, sing a short song, tell a joke, pretend to eat a bowl of spaghetti or an apple, spin around five times, tell someone you don't know well something you like about them, act like a dog, etc. The group may be seated at their desks or in a circle. As the music is played the parcel is passed from one student to the next. When the music stops, the person holding the parcel removes one layer of wrapping and follows the instruction written on the next layer of paper. Repeat until the last layer of wrapping has been removed. This last person receives the present wrapped inside.

**ACTIVITY; *egg drop***

This is an absorbing lesson, and perhaps a little more than a change-up. Split your group into smaller groups of 2 or 3. The task is to build a protective package or develop a way that can keep an egg safe from cracking after being dropped from the top of a ladder, about 2 metres high. Provide the groups with newspapers, bubble wrap, polystyrene beads, tape, rubber bands, plastic bags, egg cartons, cardboard and any other useful materials. Give each group a time limit, say 30 minutes to 1 hour to create a design. After which, groups take turns to drop the egg package from the top of the ladder to observe what happens. (Optional: you can increase the height of the egg drop until a single winner is found!)

**ACTIVITY; *floating stick***

A long thin stick similar to a broomstick is needed. Be sure to call the pole a 'floating stick' when you introduce the activity. Separate the group so there are two lines facing each other. Make the distance between them about 2 arms lengths. Ask each person to reach out with the index fingers of their right hand chest high. Once all of their index fingers are in line, gently place the 'floating stick' on top of the line of outstretched fingers. The group challenge is to lower the pole to the ground while keeping everyone's fingers touching the stick. If anyone loses contact with the pole the game begins again. At first the pole will seem to rise! In truth, the upwards pressure of everyone's fingers causes the stick to go up instead of down. Once everyone relaxes the pole can easily lower the stick to the ground. This usually takes ten minutes of laughter and a leader to complete.

**ACTIVITY; *who am I?***

This is a great activity to get to know more about one another. Ask each person to write down one interesting or defining fact about themselves on a blank card. Once done, collect their cards. Shuffle them and redistribute the cards back to the group so each person has someone else's card. The object of the activity is for each person to read what's on the card they've just received and guess which group member wrote this fact about themselves.

**ACTIVITY; *animal families***

Whisper the name of an animal to each participant. Give two players the same animal name without them knowing. Once the players have their animal name they are not permitted to speak or tell what animal they are. Instead, on "go" each person makes the sound and movement of the animal they have been given as they move about. As soon as they identify the same animal as themselves they sit on the floor together, still not speaking. Once all players are convinced they have found their species ask them who they think they are. A good variation in a large class setting is to allow just 7 or 8 students to play while the rest of the class watches. The watching is just as much fun.

**ACTIVITY; hot and cold**

This iconic change-up can be played inside or outside. The idea is that you do not tell the player, or pair or trio of players, where you want them to end up. They will need to listen to your instructions to find the place you have in mind. The only clues you will deliver are words such as; “freezing” “cold” “warm” “warmer” “colder” “hotter” “really hot” “boiling” “cooler”. Your clues gradually drive them to find the hottest spot. When they arrive let them know they have successfully listened and followed instructions. It is also great fun to let the rest of the group watch!

**ACTIVITY; find the leader?**

Sit everyone in a social circle. Select one person as a detective and ask them to leave the room for a few moments. While the detective is away, choose one person to lead the group. As the detective returns the leader may, for example, have everyone clapping in rhythm. Then, after about 20 seconds the leader might change their action to finger waving. And so, the leader continues to change their action every so often and the group must quickly follow. New actions might include; raising and lowering eye brows, clapping fingers, winking, poking out tongues, head rolling, pulling at one or both ears, leg slapping, on and off smiling. The detective’s aim is to discover the leader. This requires sharp observational skills!

**ACTIVITY; scavenger hunt**

Scavenger hunt is an outside game. It is sensible to set boundaries. Support students to find a partner. Each pair is given a paper bag and on it is a list of 2 or 3 items they must find together. They have just five minutes to get the best example of each. Here are a few ideas:

- A small twig
- A twig with two little branches coming off it
- A piece of bark
- A smooth round pebble
- A stone with two or more colours in it
- A long leaf
- A short, wide leaf
- A leaf with more than two points on it
- A flower
- A piece of paper
- Something shiny
- Something soft
- Something rare
- Something amazing
- Something that is a part of something bigger
- Something that used to be alive
- Something that is alive and very small
- Something really smooth
- Something that looks alien

It is fun to return to class and quickly look at what each pair decided to collect and hear them justify their decision.

**ACTIVITY; cooperative musical chairs**

This activity is based on the traditional musical chairs game, but with a twist. Set up a circle of chairs facing outwards with one less chair than the number of students participating. As the music plays ask the students walk clockwise around the chairs. When the music stops, the students must sit in a seat. But, unlike the traditional game, the person without a seat is not out. Instead, someone helps that person by making room for them. The game restarts and another seat is withdrawn. To be honest, the kids end up sitting on one another's laps in order to share the chairs! Afterwards, stress the themes of teamwork, cooperation and friendship.

**ACTIVITY; group strengths**

Most of us have a tiny talent, a small skill or something a little unique we can do. It may be wiggling our ears, speaking in a ridiculous voice or with an accent, going cross eyed, tongue rolling, singing, juggling, a cartwheel, a head or handstand, a magic trick, saying a rhyme or poem, finger tricks, a weird walk, doing a frog balance, being double jointed and so on. Ask for a few to demonstrate so others are immediately inspired! Give the group a few moments to practice together and then allow them to show their tiny talent. There may be one or two of who aren’t ready to share. Allow them to say

“pass” and enjoy the others who have found theirs. What you will find is that most children are keen to learn some of these tiny talents. Allow time for this to happen.

#### **ACTIVITY; *two truths, one lie***

This change-up offers a way for students to give a little information away about themselves and to learn more about others. Explain that someone will be given a turn to state two things that are true about themselves and one thing that is a lie. Each of the three statements should be confidently delivered. The rest of the group will try to guess which statement was the lie. The best idea is for you to begin so you can model how it is done!

#### **ACTIVITY; *blanket stand***

Get a blanket and lay it on the floor. Choose 4 or 5 students and ask them to stand on the blanket. Congratulate them! Next, ask them to step away from the blanket while you fold a third of the blanket under itself which makes it smaller. Invite them back on to the blanket being sure that they help balance each other to stay on it. Once again ask them to step off the blanket and fold it so it becomes slightly smaller. Invite them to step back on and help each other to be successful. Keep on going until your students have cooperated achieved pretty well. Congratulate them! Watching this is great fun too.

#### **ACTIVITY; *upside down and back again***

This change-up is a variation of ‘blanket stand’. Select a group to stand on the blanket. Once the group is settled ask them to turn the blanket over so that the underside of it is on the top. However, the players cannot step off the blanket while they do this. Finally, the blanket must be turned over again so that it is facing upwards just as it was at the start of the game. If any player touches the ground restart the game.

### **Ideas to strengthen fragile relationships and restore damaged ones**

Occasionally every one of us has a bad or regretful moment. A moment where we go too far with a student, or a class. Something happens and before we know it we have lost our composure. Suddenly, we hit an unfortunate high point where we are too annoyed, too loud, when regrettable words are spoken and we are not proud of our behaviour. Almost instantly, we wish we could take it all back, and what flashes through our mind is the all-too-common comment we make to children, it is... “You are responsible for your own behaviour.”

As your student or students leave the classroom you think, “What have I done in those few brief moments? How much damage have I caused? Have I just ruined everything? What can I do to rescue the relationship?” Damaging the relationship, you value and have worked hard to establish can feel terrible.

While what’s happened is not what you planned, and is far from ideal, students are remarkably forgiving when your history is a connected one. With the right approach, you can restore relationships relatively easily. How might you go about this? It’s always best to let the dust settle. Give yourself time to think. Talk it through with a trusted colleague, your partner or a friend. Use them as a sounding board and a means to gain a better perspective. You might choose to, sleep on it. Alternatively, you might call the student’s parents, chat through the situation and let them know you regret pushing your response too far.

The next morning, find the right moment, and confidently address what happened with the class, or privately with the student. Briefly, revisit what made you feel so annoyed, openly admit that you handled it badly and went too far. Offer a brief, but sincere apology. Say, “I’m sorry. I do feel badly! And, I’m keen to make this better.” It’s astonishing how few adults are prepared to genuinely do this with students in schools. Refrain from going on and on. Less words are more powerful. More words dilute the impact of your gesture.

This empathic act reminds kids of all ages that every one of us make mistakes. It provides authentic modelling about how to take responsibility and repair situations. It also helps young people to see you as real and as someone who cares. The idea is to make amends quickly and confidently so you and your students can get off to a new start. Resist the urge to win back their favour by giving away bags full of loot, a sporty or fun afternoon, a change-up activity or an easing of your behavioural expectations. Such methods border on being calculating and manipulative. Be pleasant, but you don’t need to transform into the fairy Godmother or Godfather.

A trusting relationship is built over time through consistent, connected behaviour. This consistency, more than anything, will help restore your relationship and influence. Rather than giving yourself a hard time over a mistake use it as an opportunity to learn and deepen your relationships. All children are reliant on poised adults who want to engage them and show respect. This is particularly important for students with oppositional styled behaviours and trauma based behaviours because given the amount of trouble that bubbles away in their life it is easy for them to feel unloved or unwanted by authority figures. If we allow them stay in this place for too long they bunker down, become hardened to the needs of others and tend to more easily lash out as a means of self-protection.

### **ACTIVITY – *the one minute challenge***

Trial this for a fortnight with one of your trickier, or harder to reach students, and assess its effectiveness. To begin, do a little homework. Discover more about this student's life, interests, challenges and family. Once you have a little background to run with find a moment to genuinely engage with them. Step right up and as a true adult and orchestrate a chat, even if it's for just one minute. It may be in the first or last five minutes of class or outside of lesson when you're not teaching. Look at them, and be with them in that moment. Share, or ask something you know they're interested in, ask for some advice or follow up on something that has occurred. As you do this, search for something you can find to like about them, or might have in common. You'll make it because they'll sense your underlying desire to connect. Now you've started don't stop! Continue to find opportunities to connect. These conversations can soothe misunderstandings, apprehension, anxiety and help to build relationships. Students often draw more strength and acceptance from the act of an educator reaching out to them than we realise.

## **To round up!**

What many of you do is beyond teaching curriculum, or managing groups of students. Teaching today is highly political, intricate, layered and emotionally fused. Quality contemporary teachers have actually become mentors to students. Mentorship includes listening and leading, teaching skills, revisiting skills, coaching, prompting, advising and being a wise guide to young people. Someone who progressively reaches into their students' world, wants to listen and make a difference. Someone who is prepared to share insights from their world and explore new ways for children of all ages to navigate their rapidly expanding world more successfully.

The bare-faced truth is that none of us can fix kids up. All we've got to offer are a few well-placed strategies, our own modelling and a spirit to participate in trusting, transparent and thoughtful relationships. In the end, each of us will be judged on a single question; "How strong was my desire to make a difference?" Sometimes when we deal with 'difficult situations,' 'tricky kids' or 'challenging students' for too long without adequate training, support and comradery we're quick to blame the kids who are often, the victims. We discount the fact that we have a choice. We can choose to be a part of the problem or a part of the solution.

### **ACTIVITY - *are you still a part of the solution?***

In reflective moments we accept that the eventual attachment of students to us, to learning and to school is strongly linked to what we extend to them. It is dependent on how much energy we have; the depth of our 'emotional reserves'. Yet, a sustained effort in schools comes at a personal cost to every educator. Each one of us can become a casualty to fatigue. We have learned that offering students a sense of control over their learning is a powerful motivator, but an unlikely option for a tired teacher. We've also learned that creating a positive attitude to learning is likely to draw much greater student engagement. Again, this is an unlikely option for a burnt-out teacher. In reality, when we feel exhausted or fed-up, the natural tendency is to grab at the restrictive techniques. We tend to pull back on relationship and strengthen rules and consequences. We give more busy-work, worksheets and colouring-in where students appear to be putting in effort, but the effort does not really equate with building relationship and stimulating achievement.

No wonder that many teachers won't return to the profession next year. Teachers are leaving in significant numbers. Research conducted by the Australian Government estimate that about 6% of teachers leave the profession most years. While this may seem a harmless figure, somewhere between 40 to 50% of our newest teachers leave within their first five years. They leave because they feel burnt out, unsupported, frustrated, disillusioned and many cannot secure permanent and full time employment (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-04/why-do-teachers-leave/8234054>).

To highlight the depth of your 'emotional reserves' work your way through these reflective questions. And, feel free to share these with colleagues;

- Why do you teach or work with students?

- What's the joy in teaching for you? Name it.
- Is there any joy or is it all grind?
- How much energy have you got left? (rate yourself; 5/5 loads, 3/5 hanging in there, 1/5 I'm drained and in trouble)
- Have you reached your shelf-life? How do you know?
- What still gets you excited about teaching? Name two things!
- What was your last kind act at school? When was it? Who received it?
- Do you still sit and laugh with students?
- Do you make a point of having lunch with them and chatting?
- Do you promote the joy of small wins with students?
- Do you make a point of developing relationships with staff members who are enlightened in their thinking and generate positive conversations about kids?
- How long is it since you deliberately took some affirming messages, stickers, badges, inexpensive stationery, certificates or vouchers out into yard, and given them away to students as you've caught them in positive interactions with each other?
- How long since you joined in a game with students, deliberately broke the teacher stereotype, and became a friendly, vulnerable learner?
- How do you think others describe you? Is this description what you want?
- Is your career going to plan? Is it what you've been working towards? Do you have a career plan?
- What is it you do so staff, students and parents know you care? In other words, what is the evidence of your care?
- What legacy do you want to leave students, staff and parents with?

#### **ACTIVITY - what does your 'mental health care plan' look like?**

To continue to connect to, and enthuse students, every educator needs opportunities to find happiness and rejuvenation. There is no other way! Without developing and sticking to a conscious 'mental health plan' our shelf-life is seriously shortened. When we feel fatigued for too long, our natural tendency is to shrink within ourselves. We bunker down to protect ourselves, and do only what we must do. The question here is; how do you take care of yourself?

What do you do on a regular basis to restore or give back to yourself? Do you ...

- ... make a regular, committed and uninterrupted time for fun, family and friends?
- ... sing in a choir, hike, tramp or bushwalk?
- ... attend an art or some kind of craft class to let your hidden talent shine?
- ... put a time aside each evening to deal with school matters, rather than allowing school to eat up your home life?
- ... listen to music and escape?
- ... join a book, gardening, movie or breakfast club?
- ... deliberately build better relationships with colleagues and leadership? After all, they are extended family?
- ... get to the gym, start walking start eating right and build your physical self?
- ... get home and, two or three times a week, take a 'nana or papa' nap?
- ... regularly treat yourself to a haircut, facial, a massage, a manicure or pedicure?
- ... want to enrol in a new course to learn; wood carving, belly dancing, cooking, leadlight, painting, or floral design?
- ... occasionally take a 'mental health day'. Tell yourself you need it and do what it takes to relax?
- ... regularly take a long soak in the bathtub and wash your school worries away and dress in around home clothes?

Do what you can to nourish yourself, recuperate and revive. The depth of our 'emotional reserves' determines how we manage and relate to students, and how long we can be productive in a school. So, build a 'mental health care plan' for yourself as well as helping others to create their own.

#### **ACTIVITY - the 'Ball of Power'**

Eventually, most children develop a psychological need to reach out for a little more power. As they begin to flex their newly found independence it is common for parents and educators to be caught off guard, and to varying degrees battle this. Unwittingly, power struggles quickly develop.

The traditional view sees adults not easily sharing power, especially with someone younger, inexperienced and who is bound to overlook the link between power, freedom and responsibility. Sometimes, there is also a fear that if the adult shares their power, they may lose some of it. I'd rather take the view that the 'Ball of Power' is there for the sharing. As

a child lights their candle from the adult's 'Ball of Power' they feel their need to grow is being recognised. This is not about relinquishing our authority and care, but instead providing new tangible opportunities for children to grow.

This is the moment for children to learn the connection between what they want and the responsibilities that accompany it. It gives them a chance to contribute so they feel as though they have influence. Let's support them to step up and feel more powerful, more autonomous and more complete. The question to ask young people is; "What choices should I be giving you so you have greater independence and see your life as yours? Enjoy the discussion. It is, however, a discussion that can only take place with young people when the adult is in an emotionally healthy place!