

Characteristics of Healthy Adult-Child Relationships

by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D.

Healthy, functional relationships between adults and children (including teacher-student relationships) are characterized by the following. Increasing the presence of these characteristics in your relationships is a great way to improve commitment, communications, cooperation and consideration, and reduce stress and conflict as well!

Proactivity

The ability to recognize and, whenever possible, accommodate the child's need for unconditional love and acceptance, safety, belonging, success, limits, fun, recognition and control (power), without allowing anyone else's needs to be violated. Anticipating; doing before (there is a problem); letting the child know limits or conditions ahead of time. Alternative to reactivity.

Win-win

The ability to get one's needs met without violating anyone else, particularly with regard to empowering a child without disempowering oneself. The ability to resolve and prevent conflict by sharing power within an authority relationship. The ability to offer choices within limits to encourage cooperation instead of obedience and people-pleasing. Alternative to win-lose (powering or permissiveness).

Success Orientation

The ability to help a child succeed by giving clear directions, setting boundaries, offering opportunities to choose and negotiate, requesting age-appropriate behaviors and responses, accommodating curricular and learning style needs, giving opportunities to self-manage and staying in present time (teaching according to a child's current needs, not anticipated demands of other teachers or grade levels in the future). Alternative to unrealistic expectations, misunderstandings, instruction or environments poorly matched to child's needs, and "set ups" for failure, passivity or rebelliousness.

Positivity

The ability to differentiate the child's worth from his or her behavior. The ability to focus on what the child is doing right and building on strengths. The ability to create a reward-oriented environment in which consequences are

positive outcomes and incentives received or experienced as a result of cooperation. The ability to communicate positively (using promises instead of threats, or reward instead of punishment, for example). The ability to maintain a sense of humor. Alternative to negativity and punitive orientation.

Eliminating Double Standards

The ability to interact and communicate with a child in ways that would be acceptable to an adult. The willingness to maintain consistency between one's own behaviors and those expected of the child. The ability to respond to a child's behavior in similar ways as would be inspired by the same behavior if it were demonstrated by an adult. The willingness to accept the fact that children require meaningful, positive outcomes for their efforts, just as adults do.

Boundaries

The ability to connect what you want with what the child wants in positive ways. The ability to motivate and reinforce cooperative behavior with outcomes other than adult approval or avoidance of negative adult reactions (shaming, criticism, abandonment). The willingness to withhold positive consequences until the child has held up his end of the bargain. The ability to immediately intervene breaches in conditions or limits of a boundary, avoiding warnings, delayed consequences, punishment, or praise.

Supportiveness

The ability to respond to a child's problems or feelings with acceptance, support and validation. The willingness to provide outlets for a child's feelings that will allow the child to externalize the feelings (get them out) without hurting himself or others. The ability to help the child seek solutions to problems without enabling, fixing, dismissing or judging the child's problems or feelings. The ability to resist adopting a child's feelings or take responsibility for the solutions to his problems, either directly solving the problems or giving advice or solutions ("shoulds").

Integrity

The ability to maintain congruence between personal values and behavior. The ability to hear and respond according to inner guidance and personal values. The ability to act within personal value system despite potential or actual criticism from others. The willingness to make decisions based on what is best for a particular child or group of children, rather than simply, automatically following tradition. The ability to withstand judgment, criticism and ridicule if necessary, without becoming defensive, apologetic or reactive. The willingness to maintain documentation to support decisions, when necessary.

Responsibility

The ability to take responsibility for feelings, without attempting to make others responsible. The ability to express feelings in non-hurtful ways. The ability to depersonalize and resolve conflict. The ability to work with the child's teachers (or other adults in the child's life) without projecting blame or demanding that they take responsibility for solving problems you may be having with a your child. The ability to resist blaming your child for lapses in your own behavior or language.

Self-Care

The ability to identify personal needs and feelings, set boundaries, take time for self, self-validate and get help when necessary. The ability to distinguish between self-care and selfishness. The ability to feel deserving of self-caring behaviors and decisions. The ability to use personal mistakes and failures as opportunities for new goals, strategies or growth. The ability to utilize support resources while maintaining responsibility for solving one's own problems. The ability to self-forgive.

Excerpted and adapted from *The Win-Win Classroom*, by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Publishing, © 2008),

Checklist

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Use this checklist to evaluate patterns in your current relationships with children and adults. If you have implemented a specific discipline or motivation approach, does it encourage relationships in which the following are true?

Proactivity:

- I focus on prevention—not reaction.
- I attempt to meet student needs in healthy, constructive ways.

Win-Win:

- I can motivate cooperative behavior without powering, threatening, humiliating or using conditional approval.
- I am more interested in encouraging cooperation than obedience, even

though the outcome behaviors usually look about the same.

___ I want to empower my students within limits that do not disempower others.

___ I use my authority to set limits, offer choices, and decide what is and is not negotiable.

Success Orientation

___ I give clear directions.

___ I set clear, pro-active and win-win boundaries.

___ I attempt to meet student curricular needs.

___ I assign tasks and activities for which my students are developmentally and experientially prepared.

___ I deliberately try to never teach over any student's head.

___ I am able to provide challenging, appropriate tasks for all of my students, even though they are at different places academically.

___ I attempt to accommodate student preferences and learning styles.

___ I give students opportunities to self-manage.

___ I stay in the present.

Positivity:

___ I can separate my students' behavior from their worth.

___ I state boundaries as promises rather than threats.

___ My classroom is reward-oriented.

___ I think of consequences as the positive outcomes for cooperation or completion.

___ I look for the positive (what the student is doing right) and build on that.

___ I try to maintain my sense of humor.

Avoiding Double Standards:

___ I model the kinds of behavior I would like my students to exhibit.

___ I avoid talking to students in ways I would not talk to adults.

___ In terms of motivation, I recognize that students desire (and deserve) to experience meaningful outcomes as a result of the behaviors they choose, just as adults do.

___ I avoid making a big deal over issues and incidents that involve my students just because they aren't adults.

Boundaries

___ I offer students a variety of meaningful positive consequences to motivate or encourage cooperative behavior.

___ I can recognize positive student behavior without reinforcing dependence and people-pleasing.

___ I avoid giving warnings, as well as delayed or meaningless consequences. (When a student misbehaves, I am willing to withdraw privileges immediately.)

___ I avoid asking for excuses. (I am willing to withhold privileges and rewards until students come through on their end regardless of their excuses.)

___ I have built in some proactive flexibility (such as requiring 95% of all homework assignments, rather than 100% or giving students until the end of the day to get work finished) so I can accommodate occasional problems that may arise without compromising my boundaries.

Supportiveness:

___ I recognize that students can't always "leave their feelings at the door," and I do not demand that they do so.

___ I can accept a student's feelings even if I don't understand or agree with them.

___ I have a variety of healthy outlets for students to use to get their feelings out (or be listened to) without creating problems for themselves or others.

___ I will listen and validate without giving advice, dismissing the problem, or interfering with the feelings.

___ I ask rather than tell to help students find solutions to problems without giving them answers or advice about what they should do.

Integrity:

___ I make choices based on my values and my students' needs regardless of possible reactions from others.

___ I am able to deal with criticism without becoming defensive, apologetic or reactive, and without explaining in order to secure approval for what I'm doing.

___ I maintain regular, positive contact with parents.

___ I minimize potential conflict with documentation and communication.

Communication:

___ I avoid using my feelings as a way to control or change others.

___ I take responsibility for solving problems that arise in my classroom.

___ I communicate positively and responsibly with parents.

___ I use administrators, support personnel and parents as resources without attempting to make them responsible for my problems.

___ When I slip up and say or do something hurtful, I take responsibility for my behavior (rather than blaming it on something the student has done).

___ When I make a mistake or fail to keep my word, I avoid making excuses and apologize to make things right.

___ I am able and willing to ask for what I want directly.

Self-care:

___ I model a commitment to personal growth.

___ I know how to set boundaries and am willing to do so to take care of myself.

___ When things get to be too much for me, I am willing to reach out for help without making others responsible for my feelings or state of mind.

___ I have developed a strong support network and am willing to use it.

___ I minimize or avoid contact with negative, toxic people and experiences.

___ I can use my mistakes and errors as opportunities for new learning rather than as excuses for beating myself up.

___ I have a variety of outlets and resources outside of the classroom for personal enrichment, relaxation, stress management and fun.

___ I acknowledge what I'm doing right and give myself space to grow and keep getting better!