

Building on Your Student Relationships

Staying Attuned in a Virtual Classroom

While the content here addresses the needs of emotionally-impacted students in particular, much of it is good practice for all students. It is well known, for example, that the quality of relationship between teachers and their students has always had a great impact on student achievement and development. However, maintaining relationships in a virtual classroom is much more challenging than when working with students in person.

There are many ways to characterize the quality of teacher-student relationship. These materials will address two areas that are most important for the success of relationships in virtual classroom learning, 1) emotional connectedness and academic responsiveness (attunement, which is covered in this document) and 2) reward value of the relationship connection (covered in the document Recognition and Reward in a Virtual Classroom).

Forming close, trusting, caring relationships with emotionally-impacted students is challenging under normal circumstances because of their history of poor attachment and bonding and their limited capacity to trust adults (<https://kevinplummerphd.com/establishing-relationships-with-students/>). Many of these students enter therapeutic classrooms with the scars of failed or unfulfilled relationships and their relationship needs interfere with their ability to function.

Emotionally-impacted students are triggered when they are working with someone who appears to be unattuned, and attunement is harder to establish in a virtual setting. When students sense that teachers are attuned to them they are more emotionally settled, feel more secure, and develop greater feelings of trust. Attunement quiets the limbic system, lowers alarm, and enables the student to be more focused on the present, better able to process and respond appropriately to what is going on. Students welcome the person who is attuned and may reject the person who isn't. Students can more easily take direction from the attuned person, more easily accept criticism, and more readily internalize praise. Higher levels of attunement enhance communication and comprehension while lower levels of attunement create communication breakdowns. Higher levels of attunement create an easier give and take while lower levels of attunement create struggles. When students are convinced that teachers genuinely care about them and believe in them as individuals, students believe in and care more about themselves, they care more about their class, and strive for greater achievement in school.

Attuned people read the emotional states of others and they adjust their interactions accordingly. Attunement is brought about when interactions between the teacher and the student reflect an understanding of student comprehension, student emotion, and student tolerance. Even if there is nothing you can do about any of this information that you are so well tuned into, it is still important that you know, that you make the effort to help, that you convince your students that you care, that it matters, and that you're thinking about them, not just about what you want them to do and what you want them to learn.

You could start each day or each session or change of subject (or more frequently, such as following every break) with a check in about how the students are feeling. Younger students may use a visual chart of feelings (that you can point to or that they can access with their computer) or they could hold up feelings cards that they can make from common emojis (even

older students might feel more comfortable using emojis). Making feelings cards from emojis can be one of your class lessons, along with instruction about how to use them.

Adjust your plans based on the feedback you are getting from the various check ins. Perhaps you'll put a game break into the schedule (or a story break, earlier snack break, reset break, etc.). Throughout the session, check back regularly with the students who expressed any concerning feelings, so they know that you haven't forgotten and they realize you care, that you're thinking about them ("When we started you said you were feeling stressed, so how are you doing now?"). When using feelings descriptors, it's helpful to have as many positive feelings on the list as you have challenging feelings. The list the children have to choose from can influence the feelings they give their attention to, so it should be fairly balanced. A list might include, frustrated, stressed, calm, encouraged, disappointed, pleased, proud, excited, sad, angry, anxious/nervous, happy, peaceful, worried.

Use the emotional comfort level of your students to adjust the tone of your voice and the choice of your words. Some emotions call for more patience, sensitivity, and understanding and this can be conveyed with voice tone and language (for more information about supportive communication see <https://kevinplummerphd.com/therapeutic-communication/> and https://kevinplummerphd.com/wp-content/uploads/Support_Your_Children_While_Home_ModulesVI-VIII.pdf). When you make adjustments based on your knowledge of how children are feeling and how they are adjusting, you are connecting with them and they are connecting with you, and these students know they are in the hands of a very capable person. With a teacher-student relationship like that, students feel cared for and they are more likely to look forward to working with their teacher in their virtual classroom.

In addition to check ins, create a routine for checking out. Students can be asked to report on anyone that they appreciate (or any aspect of the class they appreciate), something they thought went well, something they enjoyed, suggestions for improving the experience, something they hope they get to do or hope to learn at some point. It is important that the teacher has a way to remember this feedback and incorporate it if it makes sense to do so, or use it to check back with students, to show that you've been thinking about what they said and what they care about.

Emotional attunement is usually achieved by observing closely, noting changes in student response based on your interaction, and then observing again as you make the necessary adjustments, all in just a few seconds of time. This is much more difficult to do virtually, so place a greater emphasis on frequently checking in and checking out and the various methods you can use to enable the students to more easily communicate their feelings to you. If you do notice something that concerns you through your virtual observations and the student isn't bringing it to your attention (e.g., you see that a student seems confused or frustrated), make a comment about it before simply moving on. Comments are less confrontational than questions, and less likely to cause defensive behavior. Questions demand something (a response or a change) from the student, challenge the student, whereas comments allow you to more easily move ahead if the student chooses not to respond. Rather than question, "Hey, what's going on with you, why are you so frustrated?" comment, "I noticed that you seem a little frustrated" — leave a space for a response, then move on with a, "Well, let me know if there is anything I can do" or "I'll check back in a little while.". Positive comments also show you are attuned, that you notice ("You are really focused, really hard at work right now.").

Attunement is also achieved by adjusting the pace and the complexity of the learning experience to match the students' tolerance and comprehension needs. During the lesson, frequently check for comprehension. Ask for a thumbs up or down or in between. Encourage students to hold up a "confused" emoji whenever they want you to know things are going too fast or things are too complicated or they're getting mixed up or lost (putting up multiple copies of the same emoji card can indicate the severity of confusion or frustration or stress). Reassure students that you see their concerns and you're going to adjust ("When I finish this section I'm going to do some examples so you can see how it's done").

When your adjustments can show that you are responsive to student comprehension and tolerance, those adjustments help your students feel understood, reassured, and more trusting that you won't overwhelm them. They will also feel less stressed (they will be more comfortable with their stress level if they know you are aware of it).

Adjust the pace by taking more pauses for comprehension, explaining it over again and having the students ask questions and discuss. Adjust by building in more natural breaks and points of relief (work blocks followed by relief points, such as a stretch break, watching a funny video, posing a riddle, etc.) to respond to diminished tolerance. Adjust the amount of language the student has to process at one time (allow more time to process before overloading with more language). Adjust by showing more examples, more demonstrations. Use visual supports to show progress through a task and refer to this more often when you notice tolerance is diminishing (with a focus on how close to the end or how much is left).