

# Stories from the Field:

## Fostering positive peer relationships

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### About TransformEd's Series on Fostering Strong Relationships

Transforming Education has developed the [SEL Integration Approach](#) to guide classroom educators in how to integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) into academic curriculum and daily classroom routines through six key components. One of the foundational components in our approach is *Strong Relationships: Intentionally building connections with students, having a personal regard for them as individuals, and facilitating meaningful peer interactions*. **In order to further understand what educators can do - and are doing - to build strong relationships, TransformEd has produced a [series of briefs](#) or “stories from the field” that are intended to share student and educator perspectives about developing and sustaining strong relationships within the classroom and throughout the school.**

These briefs emerged after a series of visits to school campuses across the country in which students reported having strong social-emotional skills and favorable perceptions of the school environment. The goal of these visits was to learn directly from students, teachers, and administrators about the practices and supports being implemented that may be leading to more favorable school culture and stronger student social-emotional competencies and mindsets. In this series, we draw from what we learned about fostering strong relationships through our conversations and on-site observations at these schools. These briefs are grounded in student, teacher, and leader voice; present the latest research on the importance of building strong connections in the classroom and school; and provide additional resources that school teachers and leaders can easily implement in their schools to foster stronger relationships with students, among students, and with staff.

**This second brief focuses on ways teachers can support positive peer interactions in the classroom, through intentional relationship-building and social perspective-taking. In it, we discuss the research on the importance of strong peer relationships, the perspectives of educators and students in the schools we visited, and evidence-based best practices for building positive peer relationships.**

## Why do positive peer relationships matter?

Fostering positive relationships among classroom peers is important for creating a classroom environment conducive to social-emotional development and academic learning. Positive peer relationships are associated with better school engagement, including increased attendance and classroom participation.<sup>1</sup> Given the amount of time students spend with classmates and school friends, developing healthy relationships with one's peers is an important component of building students' sense of belonging in school.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, **peer relationships** can provide students with the opportunity to learn and practice both intrapersonal skills (e.g., managing one's emotions) and interpersonal skills (e.g., understanding peers' perspectives, problem-solving with peers).<sup>3</sup>

A core skill that supports students' ability to develop and sustain positive relationships in and out of the classroom is social perspective-taking, or the "capacity to make sense of others' thoughts and feelings."<sup>4</sup> Having the ability to take another's perspective allows people to develop more positive relationships with others, including those with different values and beliefs from their own.<sup>5</sup> In the classroom, students who are better at taking others' perspectives are more cooperative with one another in achieving a shared goal and engaging in collaborative work.<sup>6</sup> This, in turn, allows them to benefit from peer learning, engage in constructive communication with their peers, and resolve conflicts when they arise.<sup>7</sup> Perspective-taking skills are important for helping students develop their ability to connect with others in ways that are compassionate, kind, empathetic, and collaborative.

Since having positive peer interactions can improve student experiences and outcomes, it is important for teachers to support these connections among students and foster a connected and socially-aware classroom and learning environment. Studies find that when teachers report being aware of the social dynamics in the classroom, students have more favorable perceptions of their school environment.<sup>8</sup> Beyond awareness of peer relationships in the classroom, there are many ways teachers can support students in establishing positive relationships with their peers, particularly through strategies designed to improve students' perspective-taking skills. The next two sections of this brief offer insights from students and teachers about their experiences in building positive peer relationships. They also highlight promising practices teachers can use to help students strengthen the skills required to develop strong peer relationships.

## What do students and teachers say about fostering positive peer relationships in the classroom?

In seeking to learn more about what makes a learning environment conducive to positive social-emotional development, we identified six school campuses across the country in which students reported having strong social-emotional skills, a strong sense of belonging, and strong connections with their teachers. We then talked to both students and teachers in grades 4-6 about their relationships with one another. In those conversations, several themes arose around the importance of building strong peer relationships. As one student said, "**We have a really good bond with everybody so if something happens, our friends will kind of be like our big sisters and make sure we're alright.**" In this section, we summarize what we learned.

### Intentional culture-building can help foster students' relationships with their peers.

Multiple teachers reflected that a positive school culture cannot be built overnight. In fact, some of the schools we visited take several weeks in the beginning of the school year to build culture prior to engaging fully in academics. One administrator shared, “we actually carve out our first two weeks of our academic calendar for culture-building before we jump in[to] academics of any kind.” Other schools approached culture-building as an ongoing effort throughout the year by integrating small practices or routines over time. By providing opportunities and structures for students to learn more about each other, educators can foster a learning environment that enables students to feel collective responsibility for their peers' overall success and well-being.



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LESLIE

UPPER ELEMENTARY STUDENT

### Developing common language and building structures for communication can enhance peer interaction.

Even with the proper routines and procedures in place, young people can feel overwhelmed by talking about the emotions they are feeling. Creating and explicitly teaching students a shared language for naming their feelings removes a barrier that students may face when trying to communicate that they are upset or hurt. As such, having common language helps promote the vulnerability necessary to engage productively in conflict and understand others' experiences. This common language can, in turn, foster more positive behavior with peers. As a student from one school we visited shared, “[The teachers] want integrity and kindness at recess and a lot of things like that. So, knowing that there's a word for that, integrity or excellence, I don't know, it just feels encouraging.”



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JOHN, UPPER ELEMENTARY STUDENT



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UPPER ELEMENTARY TEACHER



In another school we visited, students and teachers normed around using the words “appreciations” and “business” during Circles, which is a time for students to build community and discuss different topics. The “appreciations” are opportunities for students to name a peer that interacted with others in a positive way. “Businesses” are opportunities for students to name a challenge they are having with a peer or to apologize to another student for their own actions.<sup>9</sup> One teacher shared that these gatherings opened up opportunities for authentic conversations: “We have circle time, which is awesome, because we do the ‘appreciations’ and the ‘businesses’. The students are very open

and honest.” Similarly, other schools use phrases such as “glows and grows” or “praise and feedback”. Regardless of the specific terms used, having common norms and language for these conversations helps students make explicit links between an action and the resulting impact on their classmates, which, in turn, supports empathy-building and perspective taking.

### Leveraging literature and current affairs can enhance social perspective-taking skills.

In the schools we visited, teachers utilized fictional texts, historical non-fiction, and current affairs to provide opportunities to explore different perspectives. They then facilitated conversations that encouraged students to identify alternative perspectives in the texts and made connections to perspective-taking in the real world. One teacher shared, “We [talked] about how learning the back story of a character can give you new insights into the character, which is true for real people, too.” Teachers can provide perspective-taking practice opportunities by encouraging students to think about the reasons for a character’s (or a real person’s) behavior and by regularly inviting multiple perspectives into conversations about literature or current affairs.



### SEL CONNECTIONS

Building strong teacher-student relationships in the classroom can also support positive peer relationships. To learn more about this topic and learn strategies to build a stronger community through teacher-student relationships, read this [companion brief](#).



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Teachers can also provide opportunities for students to practice interpreting others' perspectives in real time. For example, students might jot down what they think another peer will say before a conversation and then reflect on how accurate they were in their prediction.<sup>10</sup> Teachers also referenced prior lessons on taking the perspective of a fictional character to support students in reflecting on what their peers might be thinking when they were engaged in an interpersonal conflict. This opened up an opportunity for students to build empathy as they worked to resolve conflicts with peers.

### What classroom strategies can educators use to help students build positive peer relationships?

In this section, we recommend strategies to implement in the classroom to build and sustain strong relationships among students. This list is by no means exhaustive; the strategies described are ones that we've observed implemented well in our partner schools, that align with research on best practices, and that can be integrated seamlessly into daily classroom activities with little additional time required.

#### HAVE MORNING MEETINGS

Start the day with a morning meeting, such as a [Responsive Classroom morning meeting](#).<sup>11</sup> This type of meeting provides opportunities to build the foundations of perspective-taking by fostering a safe and inclusive environment. In a morning meeting, students can engage in four purposeful components: greeting, sharing, a group activity, and a morning message from teacher to students. During the "sharing" component, students share about important events in their lives, while their peers and teacher(s) practice offering empathetic comments or asking clarifying questions. A short video of an elementary classroom morning meeting can be found [here](#).<sup>12</sup>

## LEVERAGE TEACHABLE MOMENTS AND THOUGHTFUL MODELING

Teachers may be able to find opportunities for thoughtful modeling and spontaneous teachable moments throughout a school day to highlight the skills, self-reflection, and decision-making involved in social perspective taking. Modeling a [think-aloud](#)<sup>13</sup> can be a great strategy to demonstrate the complex thought processes that accompany social perspective-taking when making sense of what's happening in a story or trying to find a personal connection to a text. When teachers share the questions they are pondering, it can provide students with the insight and guidance to reflect on similar questions. Some sample questions that [cultivate empathy through self-reflection](#)<sup>14</sup> include:

- If I were this person, how might I be feeling?
- Can I come up with more than one way of seeing the situation?
- What might have happened in the past that would cause this person to feel this way?
- Am I feeling frustrated?
- Am I willing to listen and be open?

Asking these questions and responding to them in the first person can allow students to experience the process in real time and make connections to their own lives and experiences. Invite questions from your students about your think-aloud. Close out the activity by allowing students to reflect on the modeling they just witnessed. This synthesis will help solidify the learning for the students. This versatile strategy can be used in real-time when conflict arises in the classroom or as part of an academic exercise.

## PRACTICE THROUGH ROLE-PLAY

Role-play offers an engaging opportunity for students to practice the skills of social perspective-taking in a low-risk environment. Role-playing activities allow students to see a conflict in action and pause at key moments to reflect on the various perspectives. The most effective role-plays will include opportunities to examine a conflict that connects to real life. Ensure that students have a closing that promotes personal reflection and synthesis of their learning. A protocol for a role-play as a social-emotional learning teaching tool can be found [here](#)<sup>15</sup> and a few sample scenarios to use with your students can be found [here](#).<sup>16</sup>

## What have we learned?

In the age of assessment and high stakes accountability, classroom time comes at a premium. However, taking the time to intentionally foster positive peer relationships can help build an environment ripe for meaningful academic learning and social-emotional development. We found that the schools whose students reported positive experiences also promoted opportunities for positive peer interactions by intentionally committing to culture-building, developing a common language for feelings and behavior, and leveraging academic texts to enable students to practice social perspective-taking skills. In creating these opportunities, schools can help students build the social-emotional skills that will support them academically and throughout their lives.

## Additional Resources to Explore

- “[Learning to Walk in Another’s Shoes](#)” by Hunter Gehlbach. Provides an in-depth look at how social perspective-taking underlies many social-emotional learning outcomes and provides three key strategies for teachers to consider integrating into their daily practices.<sup>17</sup>
- [Quandary Game](#) by Learning Games Network. Free, web- and mobile-based game and curriculum designed to help students develop critical thinking and perspective-taking, practice empathy, and learn to make ethical decisions through building a colony on a virtual planet.<sup>18</sup>
- [Social Awareness Toolkit](#) by Transforming Education. Offers research, information, and resources on social awareness, including a 90-minute professional development session, facilitator’s guide, student-voice video, and a range of strategies for integrating social awareness into daily practice.
- “[Buddy Share](#)” by Teaching Tolerance. Provides an example of a buddy exercise to support students in building relationships with one another and learning from others’ life experiences.

Learn more about the importance of strong relationships and other key components for fostering optimal social-emotional learning (SEL) with Transforming Education’s SEL Integration Approach by clicking [here](#).

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