

Classroom management practice guide

Building positive connections with all students

December 2023



Effective classroom management creates safe and supportive learning environments for all students. This practice guide is part of a suite of foundational resources for beginning teachers, teachers working in new environments, or experienced teachers who want to refine or refresh specific elements of their classroom management practice. They can be used to individually reflect on and refine one's own practice, or as shared resources to support mentoring and other collaborative and whole-school approaches to improving classroom management.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)'s guidance is based on a synthesis of the most rigorous and relevant research evidence and guidance on classroom management from a wide range of research experts and expert practitioners across Australia and internationally.

This practice guide provides practical suggestions to build positive connections with your students leading to [positive teacher–student relationships](#).

Teachers play a significant role in the lives of their students, not just in terms of academic learning but also in their social and emotional development. Connecting with students to build trust and form [positive relationships](#) is instrumental in creating learning environments where students feel safe, respected and motivated to learn. Meaningful interactions and a well-managed classroom are key contributors to creating positive connections with students. Over time, this builds a sense of trust that enables students to have a sense of belonging in class.

From the very first moments students interact with you, they're identifying if you're someone to approach or avoid. Investing time and effort into connecting positively with all students and getting to know them will help you build relationships.

To build positive connections with all students:

- Interact positively with all students.
- Engage with families.
- Get to know your students.

Connecting with students requires several skills, including [acknowledgement and praise](#), [circulation](#), [clear communication](#), [non-verbal correction](#), [scanning](#) and [voice control](#).

Interact positively with all students

From your first interactions with students, verbal and non-verbal communication needs to be authentic, warm, caring and responsive. In addition to the words you say, facial expressions, tone of voice, gestures, eye contact and actions help to build a sense of security, connection and trust with your students.

Showing courtesy and respect towards students sends a message that you hold them in positive regard, are approachable and are open to listening and responding to them. Responding with understanding and empathy shows students that you value their perspective and how they view the world.

To build connections by interacting positively with students:

Always interact with students with a calm tone, respect and politeness – for example, greeting students on first encounter, completing instructions with 'Thank you', and saying goodbye to students when they [exit the classroom](#).

Frequently [acknowledge](#) students meeting behaviour expectations and [praise](#) students exceeding behaviour expectations specific to them.

Use positive non-verbal communication, such as turning to face students when they're speaking, smiling and maintaining an encouraging facial expression and positive body language.

Positively frame communication, stating, when possible, what students need to do rather than what they shouldn't (that is, avoid using words like 'no' and 'don't').

Make a conscious effort to learn students' names using a class list (photo lists can be helpful for matching names with faces) and use students' preferred names. Name tags or desk labels can support this. Ask if you're unsure how to pronounce a student's name.

Acknowledge and respond to students gaining teacher attention to seek assistance, ask a question or share information.

When responding to disengaged or disruptive behaviours, provide students with the opportunity to change their behaviour using clear communication and a calm, non-threatening tone, starting with less intrusive responses – for example, a non-verbal correction, such as a finger to the lips, combined with a look. Acknowledge students when they correct their behaviour.

Invite and respond to students' perspectives of teaching and learning, including how the learning environment and activities support their learning – for example, through a survey or speaking to students about what's working well and what could be improved.

Engage with families

Positive family–school partnerships support students' engagement in learning. Parents and primary caregivers know their children best and will have important insight and information to share. They're also able to support your work with their children. Effective two-way communication draws on the knowledge, experience and expertise of both families and teachers to support students' learning. It's important that interactions are proactive, positive, calm and respectful.

Creating a culturally safe environment where students and their families are able to participate in and contribute to learning is fundamental to effective family engagement. Truly collaborative and authentic partnerships with students and their families and communities can be supported through reflexive practices and responsiveness. Reflexive practices involve examining your identity, culture, history and biases, and how these impact your relationships with and understanding of your students, their families and the communities they live and work in.

To effectively engage with parents and primary caregivers:

Plan and use reflexive and culturally responsive practices to create a culturally safe learning environment where students and families can engage.

If possible, introduce yourself to parents and primary caregivers before the first day or soon after through methods such as a welcome letter, video or email, parent portal message or the preferred contact process of the school. It's a good idea to keep this brief and provide more detailed information in follow-up communication or a meet-the-teacher session – for example:

- Introduce and share a little about yourself. Consider including a photo.
- Convey your excitement and passion for teaching your year group or subject and their child.

- Share how you'll communicate with them and how they can communicate with you. Set reasonable expectations – for example about response times, meeting frequencies and methods of communication, such as phone calls, emails or parent portals for brief, simple communication, and meetings for more complex, detailed communication.
- Briefly explain the school and class's expectations, relevant routines, and rules, and how you'll respond to disengaged and disruptive behaviours, including seeking parent and primary caregiver support when needed.
- Share important information for the first day of school if communicating prior to school commencing.

Individually contact the parents or primary caregivers of students with additional learning needs to:

- Introduce yourself.
- Convey your excitement and passion for teaching your year group or subject and their child.
- Ask for any early information and suggestions to support their child.
- Provide an opportunity for them to ask questions.
- Establish regular communication if needed.

Seek advice and support from school support staff, such as guidance counsellors, community liaison staff or learning support staff to support communication with families, including culturally responsive communication.

Balance interactions to focus on strengths, opportunities, goals and needs.

Invite parents and primary caregivers to ask questions and share relevant information to support their child's learning.

Approach conversations about students' challenges in a collaborative, solutions-focused manner and identify opportunities to work together to support their child's learning.

Inform parents and primary caregivers of opportunities to engage – for example, supporting and attending class and school events and activities.

Follow school policies and procedures, and seek clarification and advice from support staff and school leaders when needed.

To prepare for communication with parents and primary caregivers:

Draft written communication and have a colleague, support staff member or school leader review it. Reflecting on these drafts with a critical friend or colleague who knows and understands families will help you refine your communication.

Before verbally communicating with parents and primary caregivers, script and rehearse what you'll say, providing opportunities for parent and primary caregiver input and questions. Preparation will help you to communicate clearly, positively and confidently. Practise with a colleague playing the role of the parent or primary caregiver.

Plan when you'll provide updates to and seek feedback from parents and primary caregivers about students' progress (academic, behavioural, social or emotional).

Get to know your students

Making active efforts to know your students demonstrates that you care about them and helps you to connect and build positive relationships that enable you to provide support.

It's important to understand students' cultural contexts, and individual strengths and needs. This will support you to engage students and promote a sense of belonging and identity within the class and school – for example, asking families and students how they want their cultures to be recognised, and drawing on and celebrating the cultural diversity within the class.

Students want you to be genuinely interested in them. Try to spend time getting to know your new students before the previous school year finishes and then continue to prioritise this from the first day of the new school year. This will help you build positive connections with all students.

To get to know your students over time:

Read student profiles and speak with previous teachers to learn students' names and begin to identify:

- family arrangements
- cultural contexts
- relevant medical needs
- academic, behavioural, social and emotional strengths, needs and plans
- reasonable adjustments required.

Prepare a short, introductory 'getting to know you' activity. This will allow you to learn about students' hobbies, interests, cultural contexts, spoken languages, achievements, likes and dislikes. It may also provide an opportunity to share your own. This information can support further interactions with students and may help you identify students' expectations of you. Students may need time to build enough trust to share this information. Model reflective and genuine behaviours to help build this trust.

Provide opportunities for students to identify challenges they may face and inform you of how they can be successful.

Create opportunities for students to 'check-in' at the beginning of a lesson or day – for example, to identify how students are feeling, have them complete an entrance ticket activity, such as selecting different emojis that reflect their mood, placing a token in different labelled boxes on their desk, or sticking a sticky note on a chart. You can then use this information to discreetly check-in with students or provide additional encouragement or support.

Regularly speak to students individually, and reinforce that you're interested in them, value them being a part of the class and appreciate their efforts and contributions.

During break or lunch times, talk to students about their hobbies and interests. How did their team go on the weekend? How was their camping trip? How are their pets?

Show interest in students' extracurricular activities – for example, asking about, attending or participating in school extracurricular activities, if possible, such as sports, clubs, performances or competitions.

Share a little about yourself when appropriate – for example, student-appropriate stories of life outside the classroom, interests and hobbies, when it's your birthday or what you did on the weekend or school holidays.

Interact with students you don't teach to build positive connections beyond the classroom – for example, while on playground duty. Get to know their names and ask how their day is going to show that you're interested in them and that you care.

Questions for reflection

Once you've applied the advice in this guide to build positive connections with all students, consider:

- How are the positive connections you've built with students inside and outside the classroom supporting the creation of a safe and supportive learning environment and effectively managed classroom? What other approaches could support you in building positive connections with students?
- How is interacting positively with students and knowing your students supporting your classroom management? Are you identifying specific students you need to get to know better and increase positive interactions with? When and how will you do this?
- How is engaging with families supporting positive connections with students?
- How do you establish positive connections with new students and families, including those who join the class throughout the year?
- How will you continue to build positive connections with students over the term or year?

For more practical guidance

AERO has developed a suite of resources to support teachers and school leaders to refine or refresh their foundational practices in creating safe and supportive learning environments through effective classroom management. You can read the [Classroom Management Resources: User Guide](#) for an overview of these resources and suggestions for their use.