
Advice Sheet 8

BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONS WITH ONE ADULT

Ideally, everyone who walks through the front door of the school each morning (staff and pupils) should feel that this a place where I belong and that this is an environment where I feel safe, secure and happy. One way of working towards that is to build a culture which is based on positive relations: adult – adult, pupil – adult and pupil – pupil. In reality, we cannot have an equal relationship with everyone in the environment – we work more closely with some people (our classroom colleague, our class pupils, our football team players) than with others. What is important to consider is that each pupil who comes to the school, and particularly those who display challenging behaviour, feels that there is one 'key person' whom they can trust / with whom they can talk and build a positive relationship.

Pupils who may feel insecure / unhappy can often 'act out' inappropriately. This in turn can lead to him/her getting a 'reputation' in the school as being troublesome / bold / crazy (and perhaps more cruel, unwriteable labels). Negative impressions can often prove to be self-fulfilling prophecies – if we believe a pupil to be of a particular disposition (e.g. a very 'good' pupil or a very 'bold' pupil), then we tend to take more notice of the behaviours that fit with the role we have typecast for the pupil, and perhaps ignore other behaviours. It is important to give each of our pupils, and particularly those who may display more challenging behaviour, the message that we want them to feel that they belong in the school and they have a positive contribution to make to the school. Sometimes the best way to do this is to get one staff member to act as a 'buddy' or an advocate for this pupil. This may happen quite naturally, or it may have to be planned. It could be anyone on staff: the class teacher, the principal, the Special Needs Assistant, the PE / Woodwork / Home Economics / Music teacher or perhaps even the secretary!

How can we build positive relations with this pupil? By treating him/her with respect and being interested in listening to their stories – about family, friends, what happens at home, difficulties they may be having etc. We can also find out more about their likes and dislikes: what sports they play, what types of music they listen to, who their favourite pop star / sports star is, what they like to do in their spare time, what things annoy them etc. One way of doing this is through a 'Likes / Dislikes' inventory (see Advice Sheet 24) but perhaps in an informal way (chatting and listening) rather than in a formal, checklist -type way. Through this we may find common interests that we share which help to build the bond of trust and friendship.

A note of caution about the 'significant other' in the pupil's life: it is advisable not to build the relationship to such intensity that it could be counter-productive. If the adult is sick / on maternity or parental leave or leaves the school, it can be traumatic. Sometimes this cannot be avoided, but rather than putting all the eggs in one basket, teach and encourage the pupil to build relationships with others (staff and pupils) also. Finally, it's advisable not to give personal details (phone numbers, address, email etc.) unless you're sure it's appropriate to do so – again it could be counter-productive.