

Positive teacher-student relationships lead to better teaching

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Previous research has shown positive teacher-student relationships promote student academic achievement, such as better grades and test scores, but a new study at the University of Missouri found positive teacher-student relationships lead to better teaching as well.

The findings emphasize the importance of teachers demonstrating "soft" skills, or [prosocial behaviors](#), in the classroom—such as showing kindness, compassion and caring for others—compared to solely teaching students the traditional "hard" skills of reading, writing and arithmetic.

"Students are more likely to learn when they feel cared for and valued by their teacher," said Christi Bergin, a research professor at the MU College of Education and Human Development and senior author on the study. "One reason for that is students tend to be more motivated to learn and be engaged in the classroom when their teacher likes and cares about them. Positive teacher-[student](#) relationships change student behavior, and in this study, we found building those positive relationships actually leads to better teaching, too. It changes teacher behavior."

Bergin analyzed [survey data](#) from the Network for Educator Effectiveness, a teacher growth and evaluation system developed at the MU College of Education and Human Development that is now used in more than 280 [school districts](#) across Missouri.

The survey asked students in grades four through 10 to evaluate their teachers on four teaching practices highly linked with student [academic achievement](#): sparking cognitive engagement, critical thinking and problem solving, helping students follow along from one topic to the next and making curriculum interesting and relevant. Other, "relationship-building" survey questions asked the students if they believed their teacher cared about them, was accessible to other students in class and if they enjoyed learning from the teacher.

Bergin found the students who reported having more positive relationships with their teachers also reported that their teachers used more high-impact teaching practices linked with student academic achievement. She explained that these high-impact teaching practices are

often hard to implement, as they take a lot of effort and do not happen frequently in classrooms. The study provides evidence that one way to activate high-impact teaching practices is to promote caring teacher-student relationships.

"I became interested in prosocial behavior because research shows it leads to all kinds of positive school and life outcomes, including better grades and [test scores](#), happier relationships, being liked more by peers and feeling more accepted at school," Bergin said. "Our overall objective is to promote behaviors that help children grow up to be the people you want to work with, live next to and have your kids marry. Teachers play a key role in children's development not only by teaching them how to excel in school subjects, but also by teaching them how to be prosocial human beings."

"Positive [teacher](#)-student relationships may lead to better teaching" was recently published in *Learning and Instruction*.

More information: Xintong Li et al, Positive teacher-student relationships may lead to better teaching, *Learning and Instruction* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.learninstruc.2022.101581](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2022.101581)

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