

Kindness works: Teachers' helping behaviors related to better student relationships and academic confidence

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Think back to your favorite teacher you had in school. Now, think about the subject they taught—you probably got a better grade in that subject than other classes.

Whether it is realized at the time or not, students' bonds with their [math](#) teachers can greatly impact their interest in the class.

Now, researchers at the University of Missouri have found that when a teacher believed they had a [positive association](#) with a student, that student was likely to agree that they had a positive connection as well as a higher interest and greater confidence in mathematics. In other words, having a healthy bond with a teacher might have academic perks.

"While it might not be surprising that better student-teacher relations have benefits, it is interesting to see that both students and teachers generally agree on the state of their bond," said Sara

Prewett, a postdoctoral fellow in the MU College of Education. "If a student and a teacher can both agree that they have room to build a better connection, then that's an important first step in helping a student succeed."

Prewett's team investigated more than 330 middle school students' relationships with their [math teachers](#) to discover how their interactions impacted their feelings about math. The researchers found that the more prosocial classroom behaviors and social-emotional support activities a teacher exhibited, the more likely a student was to believe they were supported by their teacher. Some examples of prosocial behavior include sharing supplies with students who are in need or encouraging students to work through problems together. Social-emotional activities are used to emotionally support students; one example is actively listening to students who need to get something off their chest.

"This study emphasizes how deeply positive experiences can impact students," Prewett said. "A student who needs a pencil and is given one by his or her math teacher feels supported. A student who struggles with his or her math homework and receives extra help feels validated. These 'small' investments in students make a difference."

Prewett says that any teacher can practice using pro-social classroom behaviors and social-emotional support techniques to set students up for success. Some of her suggestions include:

- Encourage students to share supplies when needed and work together to solve hard problems.
- Keep a stash of emergency school supplies for students who might need them, or encourage students to share if they are

able.

- Actively listen to students' concerns or frustrations, and refer them to others who can help.

"Student and teacher perceptions on [student-teacher](#) relationship quality: A middle school perspective," was published in School Psychology International. Co-authors for this study are David A. Bergin, the department chair of education, [school](#) & counseling psychology in the MU College of Education, and Francis L. Huang, an associate professor in the college.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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