

Developing Appropriate Teacher-Student Relationships

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The relationship between a student and a teacher is undoubtedly one of the most important aspects of any classroom environment. A positive teacher-student interaction allows a student to feel safe, understood, and significant. As music directors and educators, we have a distinct advantage when it comes to developing relationships with students. Students select music as their elective and are enrolled with the same teacher for multiple years. As a result, these positive relationships often have a lifelong effect on a student.

Educational research agrees that the relationship between a student and a teacher is of critical importance to a student's success in the classroom. Numerous studies have been conducted to evaluate the teacher-student relationship. Hamre and Pianta found a variety of predictions could be made based on the quality of a teacher-student relationship at the primary school level.¹ While positive relationships yielded beneficial student outcomes, negative relationships often predicted behavioral problems. Additional research by Roorda et al found that, "affective teacher-student relationships were associated with both a student's school engagement and achievement."²

While the vast majority of teacher-student relationships are positive, some can be emotionally or physically damaging. Sadly, current culture has desensitized many to this blemish on society. Films and television romanticize the idea of inappropriate relationships between teachers and students. In addition, inappropriate conduct by celebrities and politicians elicit a weekly news extravaganza.

While working in the public-school setting, it was a concern of mine to both protect myself from any appearance of impropriety, while still developing a positive and appropriate relationship with all my students. Considering the ever-increasing occurrences of inappropriate teacher-student relationships, it seemed prudent to discuss suggestions for appropriate connections between teachers and students. Although some suggestions in this article focus on methods for developing relationships between male teachers and female students, many of these suggestions are applicable for all genders.

Boundaries for Appropriate Interactions with Students

In order to develop appropriate teacher-student relationships, clear boundaries must be established. No hugs! Acceptable physical contact includes high fives or handshakes.

Hugs are not inappropriate; however, female students may perceive this physical contact differently than a teacher. Some students might feel uncomfortable receiving a hug because they feel that the teacher is invading their personal space. Alternatively, some students may develop romantic feelings for a teacher and relish receiving hugs on an almost regular basis. Establishing a contact boundary makes it clear that you do not view students in a romantic way.

Avoid Being Alone with Students

It is important to make the classroom a safe place for students. This often leads to students congregating in the music room before or after school. To remove yourself from a situation where you are alone with a student, make an excuse that requires both of you to leave the room. Another option is to be honest with the student and say, “I’m sorry, but I don’t find it appropriate to be alone with a student.”

Teachers may be required to work with students individually in private lessons. Ensure that there is a window that allows others to observe the private lesson. Avoid providing lessons when others are not around, such as before or after school and on weekends.

When waiting for students to be picked up by family members after an event, be aware of where the school’s security cameras are located and stand in view of these cameras. This provides added protection for you when left waiting alone with one student.

Avoid Interacting with Students through Electronic Media

Social media outlets have greatly improved a director’s ability to plan and communicate with his or her classes or organizations. While a fine tool, you must be cautious and

Boundaries for Appropriate Interactions with Students

- No hugs!
- Avoid being alone with students of any gender.
- Avoid interacting with students through electronic media.
- Minimize encouraging comments about appearance.
- Keep all conversations on appropriate topics.
- Be aware of and supportive of students who have been emotionally or physically abused.

never send private messages to students through any electronic media. Instead, incorporate group messaging services like *Remind* or *Group Me*, and avoid applications that provide students with your personal information or allow for private messaging services, such as *WhatsApp* and *Facebook*.

Minimize Encouraging Comments about Dress or Appearance

Comments such as, “I like the new haircut,” or “you look very nice in your concert dress.” This may be construed as flirtatious in nature, or worse, become persistent and inappropriate over time. Save these comments for large groups in order to avoid the perception that these comments are directed at individual students.

Keep all Conversation Focused on Appropriate Topics

It is important to discuss difficult topics with students in order to develop their emotional intelligence. An ability to intelligently and peacefully debate topics such as hate crimes or politics is an important skill one needs to develop. However, as students begin to trust you, it is possible for them to share intimate details of their personal life. It is wonderful when students feel comfortable opening up, but you should remain cautious about the topics discussed. There are many topics a teacher and student should never discuss. In your interaction with students, avoid topics such as gossip, sexual innuendos, degrading jokes, and your personal struggles with co-workers, parents, or other students.

Finally, be aware of female students who have been emotionally or physically abused by male role models in the past. These students may often express a great deal of distrust for male teachers. Be prepared for this possibility and diligently work at the student’s pace to develop a sense of trust and safety.

Developing Relationships

It is common in today’s culture to encounter students who do not have a positive male role model in their lives. Some students may come from broken homes without a father; others may have fathers who fail to provide them with the attention they deserve. It is for these reasons that all male educators should act as a positive role model both

for young men and women. The following are strategies to consider when developing relationships with students.

Regularly Pray for Your Students

For those directors with religious affiliations or beliefs, fervently pray for all of your students. Pray for opportunities to make a difference in their lives. Pray for the right words to encourage and discipline appropriately. Especially pray for those students you find difficult so that your attitude might change towards them. Once you prepare your heart and mind, you will be able to develop effective relationships with them.

Stand and Greet Students at the Door Every Day

While this suggestion might sound cliché, it is, in my opinion, the starting point for all interactions with students. This action sends a message to students that you are glad to see them and have been eagerly awaiting their arrival.

An action very often neglected is standing at the door when students are dismissed. This action provides the teacher with one final opportunity to encourage a student, allowing him or her to leave the classroom feeling successful, excited, and eager to return the next day.

Give Students Your Full Attention

It is deeply meaningful to a student to receive your full and undivided attention. It tells him/her that they are important to you. No matter how important a project may be that you are working on, stop what you are doing, smile, and look that student in the eyes. Music directors are often busy people, but our priority should be the students. Without them, we wouldn't have ensembles to direct.

It is easy in the fast-paced environment in which a director finds herself/himself to rudely dismiss a student who is trying to talk with you. For example, a student wants to talk with you about the upcoming trip at the beginning of class. Try your best to be polite, smile, and say, "I'm sorry, I'm trying to start class; may we talk later?" This reaction is vastly different from your saying "Not now, go to your seat!"

Having given students your full attention, listen carefully to what they have to say. Regardless of how insignificant the conversation might be to you, students deserve to be

heard. After the conversation, remember what he or she said, recalling this information in future interactions. Remembering what a student said validates the desire to be accepted and understood.

Excessively Encourage Students

Take every opportunity to encourage students, building up their self-esteem. According to the *New York Times*, a 1991 study found that "many girls emerge from adolescence with a poor self-image, relatively low expectations about life, and much less confidence in themselves and their abilities than boys."³ As male role models, encouraging these young women greatly enhances their idea of self-worth and strengthens a teacher-student relationship.

As educators, we must provide criticism for musical improvement and behavioral correction. Try to provide criticism with specific pedagogical techniques, avoiding general comments that may impact students' idea of self-worth.

Be Purposeful with Your Speech

Avoid generic conversations that lack any student individuality. In other words, talk with students about specific things in their lives. Ask them about recent extracurricular activities. Take an interest in them as individuals.

Developing Relationships

- Regularly pray for your students.
- Stand and greet students at the door every day.
- Give them your full attention; they deserve it!
- Listen to what they have to say.
- Excessively encourage.
- Be purposeful in your speech.
- Focus your attention on group leaders.
- Have compassion.

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Focus Your Attention on Group Leaders


It is difficult to develop meaningful relationships with all students in a short amount of time. Begin connecting with students by focusing on the leaders within the group. Focusing on group leaders is also an important tactic for recruiting ensemble members. Patrick Freer states that “positive peer pressure is a prominent factor as to why students join choir.”⁴

The majority of students join an ensemble based on the comments or actions of their friends. In the same way, developing a relationship with group leaders will likely expedite the relationship process with the rest of the group. At the very least, the group followers will have a positive opinion of you based on the comments of group leaders.

Upon connecting with the group leaders, make sure to divide your time wisely between groups and individuals. Do your best to spend time with all students. This helps avoid the appearance of favoritism or preferential treatment.

While all these suggestions are important, the most critical relationship for building quality is compassion. Having a genuine interest and concern for all students creates an unmistakable aura that radiates from the heart of a teacher.

One of the most iconic individuals whom I believe exemplifies this aura of compassion is the late Fred Rogers. Every episode of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* displayed a sense of peace and compassion for viewers. Mr. Rogers once said, “The greatest thing that we can do is to help somebody know that they’re loved and capable of loving.”⁵

In all that you do, through your actions, speech, and attitude, take every opportunity to let students know that they are loved. Always remember, you have the power to change lives through the relationships that you develop. 

com/1991/01/09/education/little-girls-lose-their-self-esteem-way-to-adolescence-study-finds.html.

⁴ Patrick Freer, “Technique Tuesday 010: Hacking choir retention and recruitment, with Patrick Freer,” Choir Ninja with Ryan Guth, Podcast audio, Nov. 10, 2015, <http://ryanguth.com/tt010/>.

⁵ *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?* DVD, directed by Morgan Neville (Tremolo Productions, 2018).

NOTES

¹ Bridget K. Hamre and Robert C. Pianta, “Early Teacher-Child Relationships and the Trajectory of Children’s School Outcomes through Eighth Grade,” *Child Development* 72, no. 2 (2001): 634.

² Debora L. Roorda et al., “The Influence of Affective Teacher-Student Relationships on Students’ School Engagement and Achievement: A Meta-Analytic Approach,” *Review of Educational Research* 81, no. 4 (2011): 515.

³ Suzanne Daley, “Little Girls Lose Their Self-Esteem Way to Adolescence, Study Finds,” *The New York Times*, January 9, 1991, May 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/09/education/little-girls-lose-their-self-esteem-way-to-adolescence-study-finds.html>.