

## School Connectedness: Part II Developing Relationships with Students

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In the previous session, we discussed the concept of school connectedness. It was defined as (1) a student's sense of belonging to the school community, and (2) a student's belief that adults care about them as individuals, as well as care about their learning.

Teachers took on the task to strengthen and further develop connections with students, especially those in their advisory. We talked about the idea of 'collecting students' based on the work of Gordon Neufeld, one of the authors of Hold on to Your Kids.

- **Task 1: Take a list of all of the students in your advisory. Place a check mark beside those students that you know something about them. Think about the student's hobby, interests, work, career goals, or learning preferences.**

The goal of this next session in developing school connectedness involves extending the relationships that teachers have with students even further. This session stems from research that has explored the quality of relationships between teachers and adolescents leading to positive influences on the lives of adolescents. Adults who have positively influenced the lives of adolescents have:

- Supported and encouraged
- Listened
- Set high expectations
- Showed interest in adolescents as individuals, separate from academics, sports or out of school activities
- Fostered self-decision making
- Provided another perspective during problem solving

The first session focused on getting to know students based on what they do more than who they are as an individual. This session will provide tools to assist you to explore who your students are as individuals.

***They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.***

***-Carl W. Buechner***

***We change the world by tiny individual acts of honesty, courage, kindness and integrity, by celebrating our own strengths, just a little more each day, and helping others to do the same.***

***-Jenny Fox Eades***

While working with students, we may find students' weaknesses more apparent, irritating and annoying than their strengths. We may focus our energy into addressing weaknesses by trying to help students fix a difficulty. Although this is a legitimate approach to address academic or other learning challenges, this may result in frustration for yourself and the student if you are trying to change a fundamental character attribute that a student exhibits. Instead, it may be more beneficial in developing relationships to think about the person's character strengths and to relate to them on the basis of their strengths.

Everyone has character strengths. Specific character strengths and the profile of character strengths is what make individuals unique. When we operate from our strengths we feel energized and positive about the world around us. Character strengths are not the specific knowledge we have of our talents or skills. Instead, they are the individuals' inner qualities or virtues. Finding out about and building relationships based on strengths is important for improving our own health, happiness, and sense of self-worth and has the potential to develop that in others. Building knowledge of our own personal strengths and those of others may be the means to develop relationships with students by getting to know them as individuals.

## **Getting Started**

One framework that has extensive empirical research comes from the VIA Institute. This institute has been developed by one of the founders of the positive psychology movement, M.E.P. Seligman. It is recommended that this information on character strengths is considered a useful framework or helpful guide, knowing that there are other models of character strengths.

- **Task 2: Take the online survey of character strengths for adults at [www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu). Choose to complete the VIA survey of character strengths. You will have to register to complete the survey. The free version will provide you with a list of your top five strengths and what they mean. The survey takes about 30-40 minutes to complete.**

It is important to focus on your top strengths. Spend some time thinking about how you demonstrated your strengths during a time that you were at your best, or during the best parts of your day whether at work or home. Ask yourself “What went well for me today?” or “What did I do well today?”. Think of ways to use your strengths on a daily basis. Being aware of your own strengths will help you to be more aware of strengths in your students.

- **Task 3: Watch the 2 minute video on YouTube about spotting strengths at [www.youtube.com/watch?=cznOmZzjkrA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?=cznOmZzjkrA). Make a point of noticing character strengths in your students, especially advisory students. Compliment them or thank them for their strengths. Intentionally, have a conversation with these students that points out a character strength: For example:**

**Thank a child for their honesty in admitting a mistake.**

**Congratulate a student on their perseverance in getting a task finished.**

**Say how much you enjoyed their humor when a child makes you laugh.**

**Point out their fairness when they treat their friends equally.**

**Tell them how kind they are being when they do a favor without being asked.**

**Show them you are proud of them when they forgive a classmate for having upset them.**

**Celebrate good teamwork in class groups.**

**Tell a student they are showing great courage when you see them coping with a difficult situation, like a parental separation or a bereavement.**

Research has suggested that character strengths in adolescents include kindness, humor, and love with lower rates of prudence, modesty and self-regulation. Over time, strengths with a developmental trajectory are appreciation of beauty and excellence, forgiveness, modesty, and open-mindedness. Remember, these are generalities from the research and do not necessarily tell you about the strengths of an individual student. It is also important to understand that character strengths are developmental. The environment assists in the development of character strengths. Character strengths are not simply innate.

- **Task 4: Keep track of what went well in your advisory and share at the next advisory meeting. Discuss the use of the character strengths in further developing your relationships with students.**

References:

<http://rootsofaction.com>

[www.handsonscotland.co.uk](http://www.handsonscotland.co.uk)

National Association of School Psychology, School Psychology Forum: Research in Practice. Vol 2, Issue 1, Pages 26-38, Fall 2007.