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aged 10 to 14

Matters

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Friendship Skills: Building a Foundation for a Safe and Healthy School Climate

When students know how to develop healthy relationships, the benefits for class and school climate can be enormous.

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We all develop friendships to meet our core need for belonging. The need for belonging is so strong, however, that negative relationships may result. Too often, middle school students form relationships that are unhealthy, and issues associated with unhealthy relationships can be the cause of any number of problems in the classroom and the school.

To help students build positive relationships, important skills and concepts can be introduced to students in health or other classes and then applied through individual, group, or class activities, and counselor intervention. Here are some ideas to consider:

- Have students design group service projects to help them get to know one another;
- Assign small groups within your classes that will stay together long enough for students to get to know and trust one another;
- Seize teachable moments;
- Emphasize cooperation rather than competition; and
- Look for ways to connect new students with classmates who have similar backgrounds or interests.

It's important for students to understand that healthy relationships don't just happen, they grow and develop over time. We've identified six stages of friendship:

Acquaintance. A person you "know about" from school, church, or the neighborhood.

Attraction. This person's personality has attracted your attention and you'd like to get to know him or her better.

Casual relationship. There's no personal investment. You're simply observing this person's behavior in order to learn more about his or her character.

Close relationship. You've learned you can trust each other, so you begin to share more about your feelings and values.

Intimate relationship. This level is about transparency, trusting someone enough to let that person know who you really are, your true inner self.

Mature relationship. Trust has been earned and you're both willing to work through conflicts in ways that preserve and deepen your friendship.

A Few Key Concepts

The following concepts can be key to helping students develop strong, healthy friendships. By helping your students understand and apply them, teachers will be helping them learn to make good choices and good friends.

Learning to distinguish friendly from friend. A person can be friendly to everyone without being friends with everyone. Friendliness is a reflection of personal character shown through kindness, acceptance, and respect. Being friends develops as a result of mutual likes and dislikes, similar goals and values, and positive character qualities that are demonstrated consistently in various situations and with different people.

Sharing information: public vs. private. Public information is what others learn simply by observing someone. Private information is how that someone feels about and responds to life's situations. For example, the fact that a student's parents are divorced is public information; the reasons for the divorce, how

that student feels about it, and the way that student's home life has changed because of it are private information. It's important to take time to learn if a person is trustworthy before sharing private information.

Choosing friends. Friendships take time to develop. A true friend is willing to spend time getting to know the other person's character, likes and dislikes, values, and goals.

Communicating skillfully. Communication allows us to represent ourselves well while learning more about others. Important communication skills include:

- Making introductions;
- Speaking clearly and respectfully while maintaining eye contact;
- Listening well;
- Asking appropriate questions without interrupting;
- Avoiding gossip and flattery; and
- Including others in conversations.

Maintaining relationships. Healthy friendships take time and energy to develop. Good friends have integrity, keep confidences, and deal with conflicts when they occur. They help their friends achieve their goals; give them space to develop their own interests; and respect physical, emotional, relational, and moral boundaries. They also learn to recognize whether differences are based on minor (likes/dislikes) or major (morals/ethics) factors.

Resolving conflicts. Healthy relationships grow and flourish when friends resolve issues in positive ways. Rather than fighting, friends will confront an issue sooner rather than later; deal with the attitudes involved, not just the behaviors; and learn to make and accept sincere apologies.

Making the most of technology. In today's generation, technology—e.g., Facebook, MySpace, instant messaging, blog-

ging, and texting—makes possible a wide range of social networking. These options can serve as tools that students can use to develop healthy relationships, rather than simply as ways to connect with others. Observing others while they interact with different people and in different settings can help build friendship skills and develop a clearer picture of these people.

Ending relationships when necessary. Not every relationship works out the way we want it to. It's healthy and mature to end a relationship that has become emotionally or physically harmful. Students need guidance in determining what character qualities are non-negotiable and what behaviors, attitudes, and/or values are unacceptable in the relationships they develop. They also need guidance in learning how to end or change a relationship respectfully.

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A Safe and Healthy School Climate

A safe and healthy school climate requires educators who are proactive in emphasizing positive character development and who help students learn the basic skills that will allow them to develop and maintain positive relationships. When students know how to develop healthy relationships—and how to recognize and terminate unhealthy ones—the benefits for class and school climate can be enormous.

A “Teach Them, Don't Tell Them” approach to teaching friendship skills will help to lay the foundation for positive, healthy relationships. Rather than being battlegrounds where competitors vie for attention and power, classrooms will be the safe places of learning our students need in order to excel today and in the future.

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