

Communicating with Students

Grades 4-8 Resource Guide



How to use this guide:

The **Communicating with Students Resource Guide** is a tool for educators. This guide will help to improve communication with students, grades 4-8.

In this guide, you will find specific questions about communication, answered by a variety of our Boys Town experts; from the Boys Town Center for Behavioral HealthSM to the Boys Town Common Sense Parenting[®] program and many who serve the Boys Town National Hotline[®].



Building relationships with students can be difficult. Especially if your students have experienced trauma in their home environments. However, as educators it is important to make those connections, and make an effort to communicate effectively. This guide offers tips and tricks to make communicate easy and effective.

Note: Resource Guides are also available for grades K-3 and 9-12.

For more information, visit boystowntraining.org



Communicating with Students

Getting Students to Open Up

Rather than “good” or “fine,” how do you get students to open up about their school day?

First of all, kids dislike being asked questions like, “Tell me about your day” or “How is your day going?” This is especially true if there’s been a history of trouble at school. It kind of sets them up, knowing that people are looking for problems or trouble.

So instead of asking questions like that, I would encourage teachers to first share a bit about their day and some of the ups and downs. Then, let silence do its job, be attentive and listen, and see what students come up with. Most likely they’ll be willing to share, too.

Also, timing is really important. Some kids might not be ready or willing to share during certain parts of the day. Get to know your students and when they are most likely to be talkative and open.

Julie Almquist, Manager, Boys Town Behavioral Health Clinic



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Signs my Students are Having a Bad Day

What signs stand out to teachers in the classroom when students are having a bad day?

Most teachers are going to know this already by noticing changes in student behavior. This means there are fundamental areas students usually shine in that they are now struggling with. Here are some examples of signs to look for:

- A student who's usually social is now mostly quiet.
- A student who usually has a brighter, upbeat affect now appears downcast and disengaged with others and in the classroom.
- A student has unusual changes in mood or is even just more moody in general.
- A student's physical appearance begins to deteriorate in uncharacteristic ways (wearing the same clothes for days, poor hygiene, etc.).
- A student begins to isolate and turn inward.
- A student is more sensitive and reactive to things you or others say and do.
- A student has changes in appetite.
- A student starts picking on or bullying others when ordinarily they don't do that.

All of these examples are changes in what I like to call the “fundamentals” – or ways students normally behave that are “off” or different that day.

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Stress and Anxiety

What tips would you give to teachers to recognize stress and anxiety in their students?

Be on the lookout for changes in the fundamentals of how a student usually behaves. One huge sign is focus, meaning a student seems more distracted than usual. Other signs to look for include:

- change in academic performance
- increase in irritability, anger or reactivity
- not completing tasks or assignments
- being withdrawn or tearful
- being lethargic or fatigued (likely from lack of sleep)
- leaving the classroom, rises in passes to the bathroom or requests to go to the nurse's office.

All these are sudden changes in behavior and performance that signal stress and anxiety might be a problem for a student. Once detected, you can talk to the student or the child's parents to help resolve or lessen what is troubling the student.

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Building Relationships and Trust

It is important for every child to have an adult to talk with. When it comes to building relationships and forming trust between a student and a teacher, what tips do you have to cultivate that relationship?

Adults are often too quick to jump in with answers, to try to solve problems and to give advice to kids. But we get farther faster if we can be patient, listen, validate the child's feelings and let them do the talking. A good approach to building relationships is to let silence provide an opportunity or a platform for students to express themselves. So, instead of jumping in to try to solve problems, give students an opportunity to get to know you and come to trust you and your opinion.

Another good way to build rapport is to discover and talk about common interests like music, sports, books or other subjects or activities you both might be interested in.

Finally, it's important to be genuine and authentic. Sometimes we want to put on our adult hat (teacher, coach, parent, etc.) when really what kids want and need is somebody to be authentic with them. They are pretty good at spotting somebody who's not being genuine and that can really hinder your relationship.

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Getting a Struggling Student to Talk

Do you have any tips for teachers with concerns about certain students who may be struggling with talking about what's going on?

Some tips include:

- Adults are often too quick to jump in with answers, to try to solve problems and to give advice to kids. But we get farther faster if we can be patient, listen, validate the child's feelings and let them do the talking. A good approach to building relationships is to let silence provide an opportunity or a platform for students to express themselves. So, instead of jumping in to try to solve problems, give students an opportunity to get to know you and come to trust you and your opinion.
- Another good way to build rapport is to discover and talk about common interests like music, sports, books or other subjects or activities you both might be interested in.
- It's important to be genuine and authentic. Sometimes we want to put on our adult hat (teacher, coach, parent, etc.) when really what kids want and need is somebody to be authentic with them. They are pretty good at spotting somebody who's not being genuine and that can really hinder your relationship.
- On a more subtle level, communicate availability. Either with language or just being physically present. This helps to send a message to the student that you are available.
- It is important to acknowledge when you might not be the right person for a kid. Sometimes we try to hang in there because we want to make it work and we know we can help, but it just isn't working. It's okay to say, "You know what? This isn't a good fit. Let me find somebody that I know who will be."

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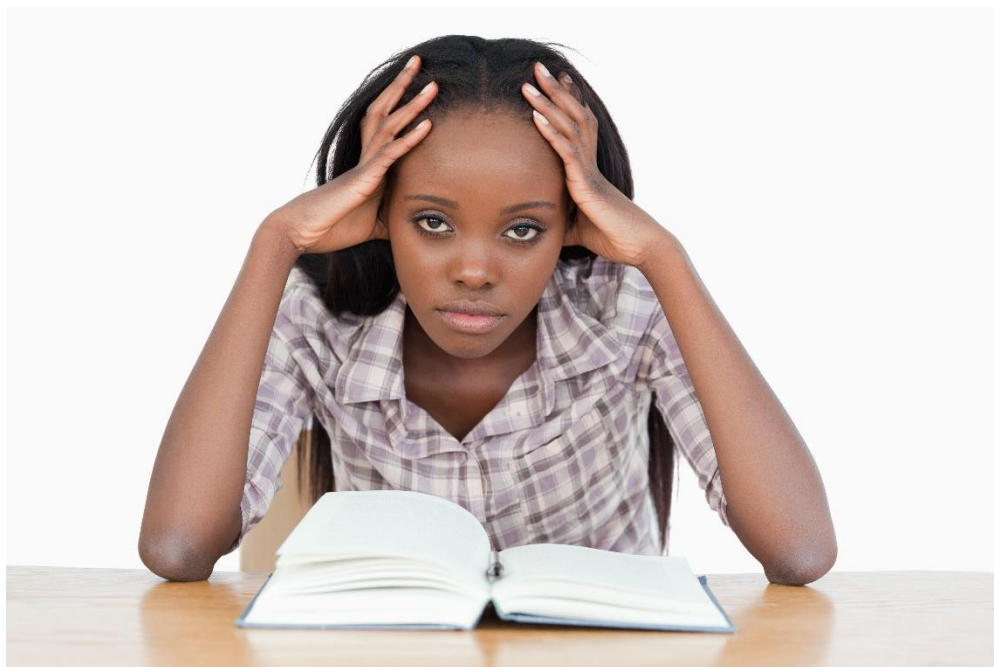
Behavioral Issues

Do you have any suggestions for developing and building relationships with kids who already have behavioral issues, or issues keeping them from communicating?

Fundamentally, all humans respond to, and typically don't get enough of in their day-to-day lives, others authentically acknowledging, showing appreciation for and approving of them as a person and who they are. When behavior is going south and your relationship with a student is strained, you can improve things by focusing on praising students for their behavior and performance.

A good praise ratio to use is 5:1, meaning for every corrective interaction you have with a student work to find five things to praise the student for through appreciating, accepting and acknowledging the things they do well and what they bring to the table. When you do this in an authentic way, students come to see you as an ally.

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Addressing Trauma

What tips can I offer to students to address things like loss, stress, and difficult emotions?

Here are some suggestions:

- Let kids know it's okay to have big feelings and strong emotions. Then, help kids identify what emotions they are feeling because they aren't very good at that. The more they understand their emotions and emotional reactivity to things, the more they come to know themselves. And that's where confidence comes from.
- Educate kids on when it might be helpful for them to reach out to someone by learning signs in their own behavior and emotional reactions that might indicate it would be beneficial to talk. Then, make sure they know there are resources available.
- Modeling how to handle big emotions is another great way to teach kids how to cope with them. You might tell a struggling student, "Hey, sometimes I feel really sad or frustrated or anxious. And here's how I know that I feel that way, and here's what I do when I feel that way."
- If you think a student is struggling, make sure they're getting a lot of positive attention and praise from you. Seek out additional opportunities for one-on-one time or more subtle one-on-one time.

Be mindful of over-interpreting experiences. Sometimes we attach adult meaning to a student's behavior and make things bigger than they may actually be. We have to be careful not to add more meaning to a student's experience than may be true.

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Contact us!

Tel: (800) 545-5771

Web: boystowntraining.org

Email: training.boystown.org



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