

4 Must-Haves for Positive Teacher-Teen Relationships

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Teenagers are renowned for wanting more freedom, and their desire for independence is a normal part of adolescent development. What teenagers want and what teenagers need is not always in perfect harmony. Adults who work with teens are often uncertain how to influence young adults whom they can no longer control. They may sabotage their authority by extending too much freedom, expecting too little, or responding to adolescent frustration with harsh words. By establishing the four pillars of consistency, respect, high expectations, and kindness in the classroom, a teacher can build a rapport with teen students that promotes engagement and success.

Consistency

Freedom without consistent rules and routines is a recipe for disaster. Teenagers need the consistency of clear boundaries, balanced schedules, and regular routines to create a safe, predictable environment conducive to success. While it seems paradoxical, consistent boundaries can increase opportunities for teenagers to experiment with their growing autonomy; total freedom often leads to problems, power struggles, and ultimately more restrictions for teens at school and at home.

This is especially evident in online education. When students transition from the traditional school to the online environment, they may be seduced by the freedom and flexibility. Freedom becomes the enemy if students do not have the self-discipline or the oversight at home to establish consistent boundaries, schedules, and routines without a teacher present. Families who establish consistency often see teenagers who struggled flourish in ways they hadn't before. Families who don't establish order may find their teens scrambling to recover academically after a semester online.

Behavioral problems and lower academic growth often plague traditional classrooms without consistency. Homes without predictability increase the probability of strained relationships and personal struggles. Fortunately, there are many online resources where teachers can learn more about [setting up rules and routines](#), [preparing students to learn](#), [enforcing rules fairly](#), and [mastering transitions](#). Schools can also help educate parents about the importance of supporting student success by [establishing consistency at home](#).

Respect

A respected teacher will find it easier to engage, influence, and inspire students. If respect cannot be demanded of students, how can a teacher create it? Students respect a teacher who makes *them* feel valued. Teachers who are highly respected focus less on impressing their students and more on highlighting the ways that their students impress others.

Being different can be particularly challenging as a teen. Teachers can facilitate prosocial behavior and illuminate the value of multiple perspectives while teaching diverse student populations. Resources like teachingtolerance.org share [critical practices for antibias education](#) to help teachers show respect for the qualities that make each student unique, while teaching students to respect each other's differences.

Teachers may inadvertently foster competition in the classroom, creating a hierarchy of power in which high-achieving students are perceived as more respected than students who are struggling. Such a hierarchy can affect struggling students' self-esteem and decrease teacher influence with the students who may need it most. By [focusing on growth](#) rather than achievement, the teacher creates an equal playing field, giving each student's hard work equal value. This both shows respect and garners it.

High Expectations

There will always be students who do not want to be pushed academically. I (Jodi) taught at a district that had an Ohio Work Education (OWE) program, and these students were in my first period English class. Many of them did not like academics and thought that because their jobs paid them, they didn't need school. They were always tired in my class, and having to read and write didn't help. They wanted to be able to sit together in a group in the back of the classroom.

They highly respected their OWE teacher. I had a private conversation with her about my expectations for them. She was a pistol of a teacher and wanted to rip into them—and they would have listened to her, momentarily. I asked our administration if we could get a substitute for her first period one day so that she and I could have a conference with the students. We created an agenda listing our expectations and reasons for these expectations. We also asked for their input to make the class successful. We negotiated that, as long as they met expectations, they could sit together in the middle of the room. We committed to meeting quarterly to reflect on how things were going.

I worried that these students would take advantage of this set up or think I wasn't strict enough, but because we laid it all out, arranged consequences, and allowed them to be heard, they were on board. Students who had barely passed previous English courses were achieving Bs in my class.

These resources can help you promote high expectations for students:

- <https://education.cu-portland.edu/blog/curriculum-teaching-strategies/how-teachers-manage-students-expectations/> LINKTARGET="_blank">Concordia University Blog</LINK> post offers suggestions for timely feedback—prioritize grading and comments so students know you are expecting a lot of yourself as well.
- <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/school-help-teens.html> LINKTARGET="_blank">Kid's Health</LINK> provides information an educator can give to parents who want to know how to support their teen in high school.<LINK URL="https://www.edutopia.org/blog/pygmalion-effect-communicating-higher-

expectations-ben-solomon" LINKTARGET="_blank">Edutopia</LINK> provides some stats and simple, daily things to do in the classroom to promote high expectations.

Kindness

When I (Jodi) taught seniors, my substitute teachers would say they could not believe how respectful my students were toward them, but they would have those same students in other classrooms, and many of those same students showed disrespect. Why? I can only think of two reasons. One is that I made it a point daily to say "please" and "thank you" to every student. My students quickly picked up on my manners and would do the same. The second reason is that my students knew I had high expectations for their behavior and the quality of their work. I did not let casual carelessness creep into our classroom community. For example, if a student threw something in the trash can, missed, and then ignored it saying, "That's what the janitor gets paid to do," it was a launchpad to discuss character as a class. Additional resources to promote kindness in the classroom include two articles from [PBS](#) and [Medium](#).

Teaching teens is equal parts challenge and reward. If you can build your classroom on the four pillars of consistency, respect, high expectations, and kindness, you will create a platform for teens to thrive in school and in their lives after graduation.

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