

three kinds of learning processes: learning through social reinforcers (e.g., **praise/encouragement**), learning through insight, and learning through imitating or identifying with another. His essay explains that for those processes to be activated, the teacher must become, in the eyes of students, a source of social reinforcers, a source of insight, and a desirable model to imitate, and these three together define what we should mean by a good teacher-student relationship.

Brendtro (1969) went on to show how those working with even relationship-resistant students can make building positive relationships between teachers and students into a full-fledged approach to behavior and classroom management by developing good communication with students, by overcoming barriers that students may put between themselves and teachers, and by making teachers more attractive models for students to imitate. The key, for him, was communication.

Brendtro's (1969) most practical suggestions included showing how occasional "small talk" with students can open lines of communication needed to develop a positive relationship and showing how educators can use humor and nonthreatening reactions to defuse charged situations when students challenge authority. However, Brendtro gave no specific methods for educators to employ, implying that much depends on educators being sensitive, exercising good judgment, and having good communication skills.

Today's educators and researchers want more specifics, or so it seems. Today, the assumption seems to be that we can, at least in principle, measure what it takes to build positive teacher-student relationships. In addition, today's educators put far more stress than did Brendtro on how the meaning of building positive teacher-student relationships changes with changes in age and context (Pianta, 2006).

INFLUENCE OF AGE ON BUILDING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

There are many ways to group by age. For our purposes, we need only distinguish between young children (roughly 3 to 6 years old) and older students (roughly 7 to 17). This distinction highlights how teachers often are called upon to meet the security needs of younger children and the autonomy needs of older students.

Relationships With Young Children

Building a positive teacher-student relationship with young children can mean making a child feel secure by feeling attached to a teacher. That is, young children often require that teacher-student relationships share features associated with secure attachments between parents and children, as is evident by their

occasionally using teachers as “secure bases” to check in with (“Look, I’ve drawn a house!”) and by their using teachers as sources of comfort when hurt, guides when confused, and allies when attacked (Scarlett, 1998).

When young children do not develop secure attachment relationships, they often misbehave (Greenberg & Speltz, 1988). Take the following as an example:

Seth, age four, entered his Head Start class at midyear. His father was in prison, and his mother worked long hours. When not in school, Seth stayed with a babysitter who, unfortunately, directed all of her affection toward her own son.

In the classroom, Seth played by himself, and when other children approached him, he often said, “Go away.” At times he disrupted others’ play, as when he would purposely kick over a classmate’s block construction. With teachers, he ignored their directives and acted as if he were totally independent.

Seth’s problem was he did not have a secure attachment, either at home or at school. So, one teacher was assigned to foster an attachment relationship with him—by repeatedly marking when he was playing (“Seth, I see you drawing”) and by encouraging Seth to “check in” (“When you finish drawing, come get me. I want to see what you have drawn.”), by going out of her way to provide him help when help was needed, by her occasionally co-playing with him, and by her doing all the little and not so little things that a sensitive parent might do for a young child.

Without additional discipline or behavior management, Seth’s behavior improved dramatically, and he became not only a cooperative child but also a positive leader in the class. (Scarlett, 1998, p. 37)

Does this mean that teachers of the very young should always act like parents to students? Not at all. As Lilian Katz explained (1989), there are and should be distinct differences between teaching and mothering. For example, it is fine for mothers to be focused on their individual child, but teachers must focus on the group as well as individuals. And it is fine for mothers to be intent always on optimizing their attachment with their child, but teachers must strike a balance between optimum attachment and optimum detachment. In Table 3.1, these and additional distinctions between mothering and teaching are defined.

Nevertheless, though teachers need not think of themselves as mothers or fathers, young children can treat them as mothers or fathers, and this is generally a good thing. Women teaching kindergarten and first grade often report instances when children inadvertently call them “mom,” another indication that at young ages, children attach to their teachers. In Katz’s (1989) words, “It may be possible for young children to feel very attached to their teachers . . . without teachers responding at the same level of intensity” (p. 54). And in special cases,