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Four Ways to Support to Teens' Social-Emotional Development at School

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According to a 2018 survey, many high school students don't believe their schools have done enough to help them deal with stress (51 percent), understand their emotions (49 percent), and solve disagreements (46 percent), and fewer than half of graduates surveyed feel prepared for life after high school.

We're learning that some social and emotional learning approaches simply aren't as effective with teens as they are with children. When teaching relationship skills, teens can sometimes find direct teaching (in the form of lectures, videos, and homework) to be patronizing and heavy-handed. Why? Teens need more opportunities to dig deeper—to actively explore who they are, what drives them, and who they want to be in the world. So how can we better address teens' developmental needs?

Researcher David Yeager and his colleagues argue that it's important to address teens' needs for status ("How do others treat me?") and respect ("Am I granted the rights I expect to be granted as a student?"). If teens feel competent, autonomous, and valued in their community—if they have a sense of high status and respect, in other words—they're likely to be more motivated and engaged.

Here are four ways you can help teens to develop greater self-awareness—and ultimately enhance their sense of status and respect among peers and adults.

1. **Invite students to use their character strengths.** If teens crave respect, it's important to create a school climate where their strengths are recognized and valued.

Take time in class to have your students identify their personal strengths, such as hope, humility, honesty, kindness, and perseverance. You can begin by asking them to take a 10-minute online survey designed by positive psychology researchers.

After they learn about some of their key strengths, ask them to choose one strength to focus on every day for a week. Have them describe the strength in writing and propose several different ways they might use it each day, and challenge them to act on that strength throughout the week. For example, if a student wants to capitalize on kindness as a strength, he might perform a random act of kindness for a peer, write a thank-you note to a teacher, or volunteer to care for abandoned animals at a local shelter over the weekend.

As an alternative to focusing on one strength all week, they might choose to focus on a different strength each day. Whichever option they choose, have them write about what they did, how it made them feel, and what they learned from the experience.

Research tells us that this activity can increase well-being and reduce symptoms of depression. It's easy for us to focus on our weaknesses and personal challenges, but when

we spend time making the most of our positive qualities, we can build greater self-esteem and confidence.

2. **Encourage students to imagine their best selves.** Another way to help students clarify who they are and how they want to be in the world is to invite them to envision their ideal future.

Ask your students to respond to the following questions in a 15-minute free-write: What is the best possible life you can imagine? Consider all the areas in your life that are important to you —relationships, school, career, hobbies and interests, etc. Be as creative and imaginative as you want, and don't worry about spelling and grammar.

Ask them to be as specific as possible, and tell them that it's easy to focus on current obstacles to reaching goals, so they should let go and simply dream about the future and exactly what it could look like.

Researchers suggest that it's important to create mindsets that blunt the power of perceived threats to teens' status and respect, and this exercise can help students feel a greater sense of control as they clarify a vision of their future self.

3. **Challenge students to explore their purpose.** Once students have practiced using their character strengths and imagined their future selves, create opportunities for them to think about how they might contribute to something larger than themselves.

The Purpose Challenge Toolkit features research-based online activities that prompt students to imagine how they might leave their mark on the world—and make it a better place.

Here are some examples:

- Respond to these questions: "Imagine you've been given a magic wand, and you can change anything you want in the world. What would you want to be different and why? Is there anything you can do to help move the world closer to this ideal? If so, how?"
- Discuss what this Viktor Frankl quote means: "Those who have a 'why' to live can bear with almost any 'how.'"
- Create a tattoo design that symbolizes the things that matter most to you.

Apart from these prompts, it's crucial to connect students' sense of purpose to what they're learning. Are they studying social issues that matter to them? Are they learning as a means to an end—or to make a difference in the world?

4. **Value student leadership in your school community.** We can't challenge adolescents to make a difference in the world without offering them opportunities to lead and be heard. High schools aren't simply holding spaces for teens. They can be places where students test their

wings, raise their voices, and learn how to effect change. In fact, students in schools with strong SEL programs and positive learning environments are more likely to report that their “voice” matters.

What does this look like beyond classroom-based suggestions (student-led conferences and class meetings, student-led instruction, and student choices in curriculum)? You can extend student influence at your school through peer mediation, mentoring, and buddy programs, as well as student-led community engagement and service learning opportunities. However, you might also offer more students advisory roles on boards or in district-level committees. Invite their feedback and input on school policies, programs, assemblies, and even hiring decisions.

Finally, to inspire more widespread student investment in your school, consider a “Strength in Voices” conference “for students, by students, to inspire students.” Michelle Hammond, student voice coordinator in the Washoe County School District in Reno, Nevada, supports an annual student-led event that features students’ strategies for improving their schools.

“One of the most important features of this event is that 80 percent of the students who are invited each year are randomly selected to assure a diverse representation of our 64,000 students,” explains Hammond. “And then we tap into that group to present at the event the following year, and/or to serve on our Student Advisory Councils.”

Student facilitators (grades 4-12) lead “breakout sessions” (with adult support) around topics like “Equity: Making It Fair for Everyone,” “Why is This ‘Teenager Thing’ so Hard? Getting SMART About Stress,” and bullying (“Why EVERYONE Must Become Part of the Solution”).

After participating in the “Strength in Voices” event, one student commented, “I have a stronger voice and can stand up for students who need it, while another encouraged peers, “Stay in school and speak up!”

Many of our students face significant obstacles in their lives due to factors beyond their control, like health challenges, poverty, and institutionalized racism. Prompting students to connect with their strengths, identify what matters most to them, and envision ways they might contribute to the world may ultimately help them to feel more respected and empowered.