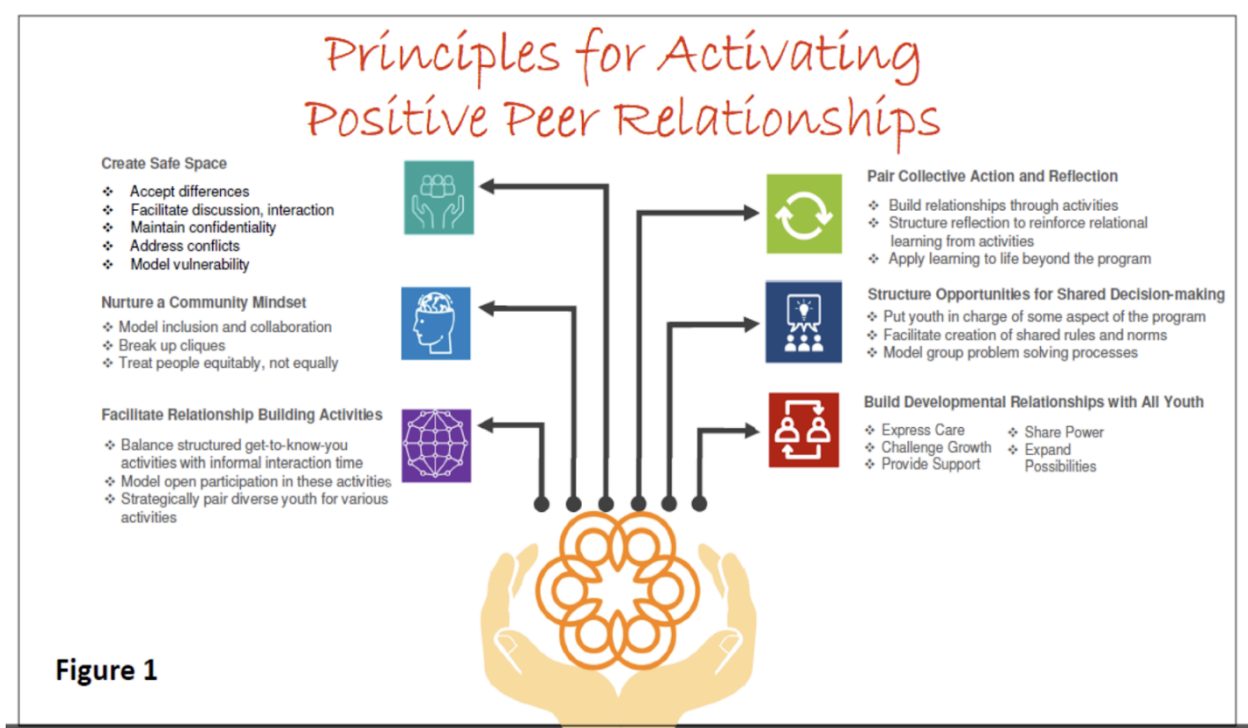


Positive Peer Relationships

WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

As research from the UChicago Consortium and others shows, early adolescence is a critical time when students begin to shift their focus from their families to acceptance by their peers, with friendships becoming a defining aspect of students' school lives.

Positive peer relationships are manifested in two main ways: specific high-quality friendships and more general peer acceptance. Friendships, where prosocial behaviors are reinforced, are predictive of academic engagement, decrease the amount of loneliness our students experience, and improve self-esteem. Peer acceptance is particularly important in middle grades, as research shows that it can predict up to 40% of an adolescents' academic achievement.¹ As educators, it is our job to help our middle school students develop friendships and to create a school climate where peer acceptance is the norm.



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HOW DO WE BUILD POSITIVE PEER RELATIONSHIPS WITH AN EQUITY LENS?

All learning is social and emotional. That is certainly true when it comes to peer relationships and navigating the ups and downs that come with being in middle school at a time when students are learning who they are, who and what they care about, and how to use their voice effectively. Knowing this, educators need to use an equity lens to think about the social skills students need to navigate these relationships without trying to “fix students” or take away their cultural competency. “True social-emotional learning (SEL) is about understanding our relationships with ourselves and with others. It’s to know ourselves as holistic human beings, and to be able to see the humanity in others to fight, together, for the world we deserve, which is rooted in equity and justice.”² It’s about making sure that we are not using SEL to control but instead to co-construct spaces with young people where positive relationships thrive. Below are resources for helping students develop positive peer relationships at your school.

CHANGE IDEA | TALKING CIRCLES

One of the primary ways to help middle school students develop healthy peer relationships is to give them the space and time to talk about their relationships and other happenings in their lives. One effective way to do this is by facilitating “Talking Circles”. The resources below provide tips for integrating circles into the school day and facilitating them effectively. You can also check out [this video](#) on how Valor Middle School keeps circles as a regular part of their school schedule.

- [CPS Restorative Practices Guide and Toolkit Circles Guide \(63-86\)](#) | The CPS Circles guide is a comprehensive resource on how to run a circle and how to structure for different contexts. The section on “Talking Circles” provides great information on how to leverage the power of circles to build community.

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- [Talking Circles Case Study \(24-28\)](#) | Read about the implementation of talking circles at *A.P. Giannini Middle School*, including the clever way they make time for circles, the importance of limiting group size, other best practices, and testimonials.
- [Zoom Circles](#) | Remote learning is not a reason to not host circles. Even though students won't be sitting in a literal circle, the power of the circle still remains. This article details how to host a successful virtual circle, the types of norms needed to make it work, and even some of the advantages that come with doing them virtually. [Having a circle to specifically talk about COVID-19](#) over Zoom can give students an important opportunity to have difficult conversations about the current state of the world.

SECONDARY DRIVER | FOSTER THE DEVELOPMENT OF FRIENDSHIPS

There are many decisions you can make as an educator to foster friendship amongst students. This section offers suggestions on how to foster friendships and the environments to make them possible.

- [Givethx](#) | *Givethx* is an online platform that facilitates SEL by giving your students the opportunity to show gratitude toward one another, their teachers, and other school staff. It has been shown to increase student well-being and social-emotional skills through the power of gratitude science. Using the platform is completely free for the 2020-2021 school year and could be a great way to promote positive peer interactions during remote learning.
- [Personal & Social Competency Profiles](#) | *The Canadian Ministry of Education* has identified three key areas that need to be taught in order for students to become personally and socially competent: positive personal and cultural identity, personal awareness and responsibility, and social responsibility. This page links to "profiles" for each of these competencies. These documents provide "I" statements and a basic framework for making sure your students grow in these three important areas.
- [Making Friends in Middle School \(22-25\)](#) | This Friendship Toolkit created by the *Arc of Massachusetts* offers a variety of simple, actionable steps educators can take to help their students make friends. This includes advice around classroom setup, lunchroom interventions, and a wide-ranging series of strategies for supporting diverse learners.

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- [Greater Good in Education Positive Peer Relationships Toolkit](#) | This toolkit from the Greater Good in Education team at Berkley offers age-specific activity protocols that can be used to facilitate student friendships. Their “Make Fast Friends”, “Getting to Know Each Other Through Dance”, and “Crooked Circle” all are fun, quick activities that can go a long way toward building healthy peer to peer relationships.

OTHER USEFUL RESOURCES

- [Facing History](#) | Identity work is essential to the middle school experience. During these years, middle grades students are learning who they are, where they fit in their community, and what they care about. The Community Matters resource from *Facing History* supports and challenges young people on this journey to see themselves as unique individuals with a desire to belong.
- [Strategies for Teaching Fearless SEL for Societal Change](#) | Becoming more civically engaged can be a big part of an adolescent’s social development. This guide from the *Greater Good in Education Research Center* at Berkeley connects the SEL skills you are helping your students develop with their lives and larger societal issues.
- [The Forgotten Intervention: How to Design Environments that Foster Friendship](#) | The final section “How to Create Friendship Building Environments” from The International Child and Youth Care Network provides 12 reflection questions to determine whether you are creating a classroom environment conducive to fostering friendship. Questions like “Does the environment convey to children that adults consider friendships important and obtainable?” and “Does the environment provide diversity in friendship choices?” can help ground your thinking about strengths and growth areas in your classroom environment.

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Language in the Guide Was Adapted From:

[1] “Positive Peer Relationships.” Greater Good In Education, University of California Berkeley, 2019, <https://ggie.berkeley.edu/school-relationships/positive-peer-relationships/?level=13#tab>

[2] Communities for Just Schools Fund. “When SEL Is Used as Another Form of Policing.” Medium, Medium, 12 May 2020, medium.com/@justschools/when-sel-is-used-as-another-form-of-policing-fa53cf85dce4.