

Good relationships

A sense of connection and belonging

Good relationships are really important for our wellbeing. Humans have evolved as social animals, so we have a deep, natural need to connect with other people and to belong to a social group. This sense of connection and belonging comes from good relationships with the people around us - in our families, at work or school and with our friends. There is strong evidence that when we feel we belong, we will flourish.

This section explains what makes a good relationship. It gives information on how you can build better relationships with children and how you can help children form good relationships with others. A child's ability to develop good relationships is an extremely important step on the path to getting the best out of his or her life.

What makes a good relationship?

Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier.

Mother Theresa

Whether the relationship is between friends, family members, partners, a teacher and a pupil, work colleagues, etc. there are four key elements of any good relationship:

- Trusting each other
- Effective communication
- Mutual respect and mutual benefit
- Valuing differences.

Trusting each other

Trusting someone else is the foundation of a good relationship. We can strengthen or weaken someone's trust in us by what we say and do. To strengthen a relationship, it is important to think about the little things we can say or do to keep the other person's trust - for example, we can be open and honest with them, keep our promises and try to understand their point of view. As adults who work with or care for children, you can help develop your relationships with children by doing things that build their trust in you. This will show them how to trust others and behave in a way which helps others trust them.

Effective communication

Often, we focus on trying to get our point across or saying how we feel about something. However, communication is a two-way process - it involves listening as well as speaking. How we listen to others is just as important as what we say to them. But good listening is much more than staying silent when another speaks. The most effective form of listening for building good relationships is empathic listening. Empathy is about seeing things from the other person's point of view. So, empathic listening means listening with the intention of really understanding what the other person means and how the other person feels. We are much more likely to build good relationships with children and young people if we really make an effort to see things from their point of view. If we do this, they will feel supported and

understood, and are much more likely to open up and tell us about what's happening in their lives and how they feel.

Seeing things from a child's point of view is not easy. It means really trying to step into their shoes and imagine how a situation looks through their eyes and how it feels to them. This quote helps us understand how children (and adults!) really want to be listened to:

When I ask you to listen and you start giving advice, you have not done what I have asked. When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings. When I ask you to listen and you feel you have to do something to solve my problem, you have failed me, strange as it may seem. Listen! All I ask is that you listen: not talk or do – just hear me.

Ralph Roughton

We also need to consider the child's perspective if they ask us for our opinion or advice. Children are much more likely to listen to our opinion or advice if we can put it in a way that means something to them. For example, if they ask us for advice on what subjects they should study at high school, it may be best to explain why we think certain subjects would be better than others. Or it may be that they don't want specific advice on what subjects they should do, but they want us to help them think about it so they can then make the decision more effectively themselves. So, asking probing questions like: "what do you enjoy doing most?" or "what would you like to find out more about?" or "what would you be most happy doing as a job on a daily basis?" may help them make the decision for themselves.

If a person is understood, he or she belongs.

Carl Rogers

Effective communication is not just about speaking and listening. It is also about watching and feeling. Our body language and tone of voice actually communicate more strongly than the words we use. So, listening effectively involves tuning in closely to the other person's body language and tone of voice as well as their words.

Did you know?



Research has found that, when we communicate face-to-face about our likes and dislikes, only 7% of the meaning is conveyed by the words we use. 55% is conveyed by our facial expressions and other body language. 38% is conveyed by our tone of voice.

Mehrabian, A. (1971). *Silent Messages*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth.

Mutual respect and mutual benefit

Mutual respect is essential for good relationships. This means that everyone in the relationship respects each other. Respecting others means being considerate towards them, thinking about their feelings and accepting that they may have different views and opinions to you. A good relationship with a child would mean that you would respect them and they would respect you.

Good long-term relationships also involve giving to others (for example: time, kindness, praise, etc.). However, just because you give, it doesn't mean that you lose out - everyone in the relationship should give, so everyone should expect to benefit (mutual benefit). A good relationship with a child would mean that they benefit from their relationship with you and you would benefit from your relationship with them.

When there is a problem in a good relationship, the two people will try to find a way to cooperate with each other because they want each other to benefit. They don't want one person to win and the other to lose. It may not always be easy to find a way that works for both people, but if they take the time to understand each other, they are more likely to find a solution.

Children don't have to compete with each other to gain recognition or opportunities. We all have different abilities and strengths, and if we teach children to respect each other and to see each others' strengths, we will be helping them to see that everyone can achieve in their own way. Their own success does not have to be diminished by another child's success. And, if you can help them to help each other to be successful, you will be helping them to build better relationships with each other.

You don't have to blow out the other person's light to let your own shine.

Bernard M. Baruch

Valuing differences

Good relationships can lead to great ideas, creativity and achievement. We are all different, and in good relationships, people *celebrate* their differences, they don't just *tolerate* their differences. They may have different religious or political beliefs, different kinds of lifestyles, different personalities or different abilities. But they use this diversity and richness of experience to create better ideas and new solutions or create a great team achievement.

Children, especially teenagers, often want to 'fit in' with their peer group. Feeling comfortable with the people around us is important. But to fit in and feel comfortable with others, we don't have to be the same as others, we just have to accept and value others. If we can make others feel accepted and valued, then they are more likely to accept and value us.

As adults who work with or care for children, you can help them see that everyone is different and people see the world in a different ways. If they accept and learn to value these differences in others, they are more likely to develop good relationships with their family and friends. In addition, the differences between the people in these relationships will inspire them to open their minds to creative ideas and new ways of thinking.

Alone we can do so little: together we can do so much.

Helen Keller

How to build better relationships with children

- Build trust in your relationships with children - keep your promises, be honest and clear about what you expect from them, apologise when you make a mistake and forgive them for their mistakes. Help them understand that you expect them to do the same with you.
- Take time to listen to a child. Focus on what they are saying and tune in to their body language to try and work out what they are feeling. Put aside how you feel and what you think while you are listening to them, so you can really try to see things from their point of view. If you are busy and unable to concentrate on the child fully when they want to speak to you, explain to them that you'll need to finish what you're doing so that you can then listen to them properly.

Case example



Before I tuck the kids into bed we try to have a 10 minute chat about the day. They look forward to telling me all about their day – what went well and anything they are worried about. I tell them about my day too. We pass around a teddy bear to hold when we are speaking and only the person holding the teddy bear is allowed to speak while the others listen.

Linda, mum of Lucy and Emma (11 year old twins)

- Actively check that you understand what they mean and how they feel, for example, "It sounds like you are feeling sad because you wanted to have a turn like everyone else and you missed out." Sometimes you might think you have understood when you actually haven't.
- Often children find it easier to talk when you are doing something with them like washing the dishes together or driving them somewhere in the car, rather than sitting down to talk, face-to-face.
- One-to-one time with a child may be difficult to fit in, but it can be beneficial to a relationship if you can find the time. Spending time with a child shows them that you are interested in them and enjoy their company.
- Try to appreciate a child rather than criticise them. Try not to put a child off talking to you by saying things like "that was silly" or "why can't you be more tidy" or "grow up". Instead, notice when a child is helpful or kind or brave or funny and tell them. Positive, appreciative language will help build your relationship with a child and will help build their confidence. If you have to criticise, make sure your criticism is constructive, and describes the behaviour, not the person.
- Sometimes when a child experiences a negative emotion (for example, sadness, anger or disappointment) we rush to try to fix it because we want to protect them from any pain. However these feelings are part of life and children need to learn to cope with them. Let the child know that you understand how he or she feels. This will help them learn how to handle their feelings. Try it next time a child is upset. For example, say "I can tell you're feeling sad about that. It must be very difficult for you." Once they feel heard and understood they can think more clearly about what to do, making it easier for them to solve the problem or get over the upset themselves. Or they may ask you for your advice or support.
- Show respect for children. Remember that a child's idea of what is important may be very different from yours. Try to remember this when you are busy and they want to tell you something very urgently, for example, that they got the part they wanted in the school play.
- When you are setting rules, try to consider the child's perspective and explain the reasons for your rules fully. For example, if a teenager wants to stay out late with friends you might say: "I understand that you want to fit in with your friends and I understand that you want to have fun with them. That makes sense and I think it's great that you get on so well with your friends. But on this occasion I want you to come home by ten because I am concerned that you'll not get enough sleep and you'll be tired at school."
- When you have a conflict with a child, there is an opportunity for learning about how to solve problems. Conflicts help children to understand that other people have different thoughts and feelings to their own. Listen to the child and try to understand their point

of view, and help them to understand yours. Then together, try to think of ways to solve the problem that you are both happy with. It might take a while but it will be worth it, and will help to build your relationship.

- Involve children in group or family discussions to help them feel they belong, for example when you are making changes to routines or planning an outing or activity.

How to help children build better relationships

- Be a good role model. When you have strong, respectful relationships and interact with others in a kind, appreciative and caring way, children will learn from your example.
- By building trusting relationships with children, you will show them how to trust others.
- Encourage friendships with other children from an early age. Children need practice in order to learn to share, take turns, solve problems and feel the joy that comes from having good friends.
- When children are playing together, take the opportunity to help them develop their relationship-building skills:
 - encourage them to help each other (e.g. when tidying up or getting a snack)
 - show them how their behaviour might affect others (e.g. how leaving a child out of a game might make them feel upset)
 - help young children develop empathy for other children by helping them focus on another child's feelings. For example, if a child hurts another, instead of just asking them to say sorry, you could say, "Look at David, he's crying because you pushed him. Maybe he feels sore or sad. Let's go and see if he's ok."
- Help children to see that different ways of doing things is a good thing. If we celebrate the fact that everyone is different, we will be more creative together and able to come up with new ideas that no one was able to think up on their own. So, encourage children to work together in groups. Encourage them to really listen and try to understand, not just tolerate, each person's ideas and contribution.

Activities

Here are some activities to encourage the development of good relationships:

Taking turns



Try using an egg timer to help people listen to each other, especially when you have a problem to solve like, for example, what time a teenager should get home at night. Each person involved gets the chance to speak until the egg timer runs out – then the next person gets the chance to speak and so on. No one should interrupt while someone is speaking.

Our Trophy



Think about what your family, class or group does best together and celebrate it by creating your own unique trophy.

What you need:

- Paper and pen
- A large plastic pop bottle
- Plastic junk and other creative scraps you can find
- Plastic-friendly glue
- Scissors
- Tissue paper, paint, brushes, etc.

What you do:

- Talk about what you think your family, class or group is best at doing together. Are you good at talking, being tidy, eating meals together, sports, music, solving problems, moving house, supporting each other, etc? It must be something that involves everyone in your family, class or group.
- When you've decided what you're really good at, create a special trophy for yourselves. The design, words, and decorations on the award, must say something about your special skills.
- Make the trophy together out of your creative and recycled scraps. Perhaps you could cut the top off an empty pop bottle and turn it upside down to make a cup shape? Or use an upturned plastic flowerpot as the base for the trophy? Or use an old foil tray to create a silver trophy? Or make your own kind of 'Oscar' from papier maché, or clay.
- Cut words for your trophy from old newspapers, or print them on your computer. Decorate your creation with layers of tissue paper, plastic cut from old carrier bags, or odds and ends you no longer need.
- When you've finished your trophy, have a mini celebration and present it to yourselves! Well done!

Other ideas:

- Go on a trophy hunt where each person searches for the things that would make good trophies for all the other people in their family, class or group. Perhaps a ball would make a trophy for the best footballer, a smiley face for the happiest person, or a small notebook for the best storyteller.
- Make sure the trophies are given for positive qualities (like 'best peacemaker') and not for negative qualities (like the 'messiest person').
- If you don't have the time to find a trophy, draw pictures of your trophy designs instead.
- Hold a funny award ceremony where each person takes it in turns to stand on a pedestal and receive their 'trophies' from everyone else.

Peace Doves



What do you think helps people to live together peacefully? Write your ideas on simple dove shapes to make a group mobile/model for your class or a decoration for your home.

What you need:

- White card
- White paper
- White tissue paper
- White feathers
- White collage items
- Glue and brushes or glue sticks
- Scissors
- White thread
- Pencils and erasers
- Dove pattern or templates (you can find these on Google images).

What you do:

- Think about what helps people to live together peacefully in your family, class or friendship group.
- Draw a simple dove shape on the white card using a template. On the body of your dove write one of the things that you think helps people to live together peacefully.
- Decorate your dove with white collage materials.
- Punch a hole in the middle of the top of your dove's body so that it will balance when it's hanging from a thread.
- Read what other people have written on their doves.
- Hang your doves together in a safe place. You could hang them on some branches that have been put into a stable container, like a tree; or from an expanding curtain rail wedged across a window; or from a string tied safely across a room; or from an interesting branch hanging securely from the ceiling.

Some things to talk about together:

- How important is it to live together peacefully?
- What are some of the things that people argue and fight about?
- What did you learn from reading what other people had written on their doves?
- How can you help yourself, and the people around you, to live together more peacefully?
- How can everyone work together to help your class, group, family, or world become a more peaceful place?

Other ideas:

- Instead of making individual doves, work together to make a really big dove and write everyone's ideas about living together peacefully on its body.
- Write your peaceful ideas on large strips of thin white card and loop them together to make a long paper chain of ideas.
- Look at some symbols for peace and talk about what they can tell you about living together peacefully. Then create your own symbols for peace and harmony and talk about what your design means to you.