

Getting Along with Your Teachers

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Your algebra teacher wears clothes from 1985 and always mispronounces your name. Your English teacher loves to start classes with pop quizzes. It can be hard to think of these givers of grades as real people. But they eat pizza, watch movies, and enjoy sports on the weekends, just like you.

So how can you get along with your teachers? Here are some tips.

Why Work on Good Relationships With Teachers?

A good relationship with a teacher today may help you in the future. You will need teachers' written recommendations to apply to a college or for a job after high school. And if you're thinking about going into a career in science, who better to ask about the field than your science teacher?

Teachers are often plugged into the community and may be the first to find out about local competitions, activities, or contests. They also may know about grants and scholarships. Sonia's Spanish teacher found out about a contest for exchange program scholarships in Brazil and Spain. Her teacher encouraged and guided her, and Sonia's months and months of work earned her a scholarship as an exchange student.

Teachers are often asked to appoint students to student offices or they may recommend students as volunteers for special community programs. All of these activities can help you get into college or get a good job.

Teachers are another group of adults in your life who can look out for you, guide you, and provide you with an adult perspective. Many are willing to answer questions, offer advice, and help with personal problems.

Developing Good Teacher-Student Relationships

We all have our favorite teachers — those who seem truly interested and treat us as intelligent beings. But what about teachers we don't know as well (or even don't like much)?

You can do lots of things to get a good connection going with your teacher. First, do the obvious stuff: show up for class on time, with all assignments completed. Be alert, be respectful, and ask questions.

Show an interest in the subject. Obviously, your teachers are really interested in their subjects or they wouldn't have decided to teach them! Showing the teacher that you care — even if you're not a math whiz or fluent in French — sends the message that you are a dedicated student.

You can also schedule a private conference during a teacher's free period. Use this time to get extra help, ask questions, inquire about a career in the subject, or talk about your progress in class. You may be surprised to learn that your teacher is a bit more relaxed one-on-one than when lecturing in front of the whole class.

It is possible to try too hard, though. Here are some things to avoid when trying to establish a relationship with your teacher:

Not being sincere. Teachers sense when your only motivation is to get special treatment, a college reference, or a job recommendation.

Trying to be teacher's pet. Your behavior will come off as phony and your classmates may start to resent you.

Giving extravagant gifts. It's OK to offer a small token of appreciation to teachers if they've been helpful to you. But flashy, expensive items could send the wrong message, and a teacher is usually not allowed to accept anything expensive.

Common Teacher-Student Problems

If you're having problems with a teacher, try to figure out why. Do you dislike the subject? Or do you like the subject but just can't warm up to the teacher?

If you don't like the subject being taught, it can affect your relationship with the teacher. Some students say it helps them to think of classes that seem like chores as stepping stones toward a bigger goal, like getting a diploma or going on to college. This allows students to keep the class in perspective.

Other students say they try to find the practical value in classes they don't like. You may hate math, but learning how to calculate averages and percentages can help you in everything from sports to leaving a tip.

If you find a subject hard, talk to your teacher or a parent about extra tutoring. If you find it boring, talk to your teacher (or another favorite teacher, friend, or parent) about ways to see the subject in a different light. Ian constantly fell asleep in his sophomore history class because the past seemed so removed from reality. But things changed when he mentioned his struggle over a project to his homeroom teacher. The teacher talked to Ian and found out that his great-grandfather had fought in World War II. The teacher suggested Ian use his great-grandfather's letters in his project. Not only did Ian get an A, he also learned a lot about a family member he barely remembered from childhood.

What if you just don't like the teacher? When it comes to working with teachers, personality can come into play just as it can in any relationship. People naturally just get along better with some people than with others — it's impossible to like everyone all the time. Learning to work with people you don't connect with easily is a good skill to have in life, no matter what your goals are.

If you feel at odds with your teacher, pick your battles carefully. Questioning a grade or asking to retake a test once is fine. But second-guessing a teacher's judgment on your grades all the time may annoy him or her. Constantly squabbling over a few points on every assignment can cause friction in your relationship.

Common courtesy and respect are basic building blocks of any relationship. Just as teachers need to be fair and treat everyone equally, students have responsibilities too. You don't have to like your teacher or agree with what he or she says, but it is necessary to be polite. If you need to be out of school for medical or other reasons, let your teacher know. And it's your responsibility to make up the work from missed classes. Don't expect your teacher to hunt you down or take class time to fill you in.

Just like personal problems can sometimes slow you down, the same is true for your teachers. Job stress, family issues, or health problems are all factors that can affect a teacher's performance, leaving him or her cranky, irritable, or unable to concentrate.

Keep in mind that too much disciplinary action can show up on a student's permanent record. This means that when someone asks for your high school record, they can see the things you did — even if they happened years ago.

What to Do if You Don't Get Along

Before you try to get out of a class to escape a teacher you don't like, here are a few things you can try to make a difficult relationship work:

Meet with the teacher and try to communicate what you're feeling. Tell him or her what's on your mind, using statements such as, "It embarrasses me in class when I feel like my intelligence is being put down" or "I can't learn in class when I feel like only a few people ever get called on to participate." See if you can work it out between the two of you.

Ask yourself, "What can I learn from this teacher?" Even if you don't worship his or her personality or lectures, dig deep until you find a subject in which your teacher is very knowledgeable. Focus on that part of the teacher's personality, and use it as a tool for learning. Not only will you gain more knowledge in that subject, but a closer relationship with your teacher may help you understand one another better.

Talk to students who are doing well in the class and ask them for tips, tools, and a plan of action to get along with the teacher better. Sometimes having a second set of notes can be helpful, so asking a classmate who is willing to share them with you is a great idea. If you're too shy to talk to other students, study their actions and behavior in the classroom and try to follow that lead.

If you still can't get along, make an appointment with the school guidance counselor, who can offer many tips and suggestions for getting more out of difficult teacher relationships. Sometimes a guidance counselor can act as a mediator between you and the teacher.

If your relationship problems can't be solved in school, then it's time to tell your parents or guardians. Let them meet with your teacher and try to work it out.

Chances are that you won't encounter physical or verbal abuse (like racist or sexist comments) in the classroom. But if a teacher has done or said anything that makes you uncomfortable, immediately report it to your parents, your guidance counselor, another teacher, the school principal, or an administrator.

Teachers are there for more than just homework, and they know about more than just their subject matter. They can help you learn how to function as an adult and a lifelong learner. Undoubtedly, there will be a few teachers along the way who you'll always remember — and who might change your life forever.

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