

# THE EMOTIONAL CLIMATE OF YOUR CLASSROOM

## OVERVIEW

The emotional climate of a classroom significantly impacts students' academic achievement (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White & Salovey, 2012). If you struggle with classroom management, unmotivated students, or lessons that just don't go well, the problem might have something to do with climate. Even if you already do a good job of building and maintaining a healthy classroom climate, there's always room to improve.

When fine-tuning your classroom climate, it helps to consider how you're doing in these four areas: **academic safety, validation, connection, and language.**

## 1

## ACADEMIC SAFETY

In a classroom that is **academically safe**, students feel comfortable asking questions, seeking help, admitting they don't know things, and taking risks. Here are a few simple, powerful ways to boost academic safety in your classroom.

### 1. Build in more checks for understanding.

- Ask direct questions instead of asking FOR questions.
- Have students explain things to each other.
- Do the first few steps together.
- Have students score a sample completed task.

### 2. Teach students how to ask questions.

Providing question stems can help them in this practice.

### 3. Establish a plan for private questions.

Some students will only ask if they don't have an audience; teach them how and when they can ask you questions in private.

### 4. Create contingency plans.

What should students do if they get stuck at home? Or when you are unavailable? Think through these scenarios and let students know what they should do.

### 5. Ask your students.

Periodically survey students with questions like, "Do you feel comfortable asking for help in this class?" "Do you know what to do when you get stuck?"

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2

VALIDATION

**Validation** is the act of recognizing and affirming the feelings or perspective of another person. (It is NOT the same as agreeing with them.) The more we can validate the feelings and concerns of our students, the more supported they will feel.

**Unhelpful Responses to Negative Comments:** When students complain, we may react in ways that invalidate them: argue with them, dismiss or deny their feelings, ignore their concerns, or resort to *ad hominem* attacks (criticizing their character) instead of focusing on the content of their message. These responses do nothing to solve the problem; instead, they can cause students to misbehave, shut down, and ultimately not trust us.

**Validation in 2 Steps:**

1. Reflect the content. (“You think this book is stupid, huh?”)
2. Acknowledge the emotion and communicate acceptance. (“It can be pretty frustrating to read a book that makes no sense to you. I felt the same way about...”)

For a more detailed discussion, see the article [The Magic of Validation](#).

3

CONNECTION

One of the most important things we can do to build a safe, supportive environment in our classrooms is to regularly do things to form connections between ourselves and our students, and between the students themselves. Here are some great ways to do that:

- **Drop the Nostalgia:** When we are always looking back at how much better things (and students) used to be, it blocks our ability to connect with the students we have NOW.
- **Tell Your Own Stories:** If you are willing to share stories about yourself, you’ll help students feel more comfortable sharing their own.
- **The 2x10 Strategy:** For a particularly hard-to-reach or challenging student, spend two minutes a day for 10 straight days just having normal, non-academic conversations with them. This simple approach [has worked for many teachers](#).
- **360 Spreadsheets:** Collect information on students’ hobbies, pets, favorite snacks, family life, etc., on a spreadsheet, and add to it over the year. [Learn more here](#).

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## CONNECTION

- **Dialogue Journals:** These two-way journals between teachers and students offer a way to build trust and get to know students as individuals. [Learn more here.](#)
- **Low-risk Icebreakers:** Many popular icebreakers ask students to divulge too much personal information too soon, but it's important to help students get to know each other. [These three low-risk icebreakers](#) have been very popular with all age groups.

## 4

## LANGUAGE

Small tweaks in the language we use can really have an impact on classroom climate, communicating classroom norms, establishing student agency, shaping student identity, and building trust.

INSTEAD OF...	WHAT IF YOU SAID...
Any questions?	What questions do you have?
Here's what you need to learn about this.	What are you noticing?
Which of you geniuses forgot to put your name on your paper?	I have a paper without a name.
Here's what you should do next.	What do you plan to do next?
I'm disappointed by your behavior.	That's not like you.

Two excellent guidebooks on this are Johnston's *Choice Words* and Faber & Mazlish's *How to Talk So Kids Can Learn*.

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