

HOW TO HELP STUDENTS SETTLE IN THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR



The beginning of the school year can be a difficult time for students. Evidence suggests that the stress may lead to an [initial reduction in grades and problems with self-esteem and attitudes](#) towards teachers. But there are steps teachers can take to make things easier.

Ideally, some work to help minimise this would have already happened in the weeks and months leading up to the start of the school year – [useful strategies](#) include taster days, giving out clear information to set expectations, and using some of next year's material in advance. However, there may be some students who struggle to adapt. So what are some strategies teachers can use once the year has begun?

FIND OUT WHAT'S CAUSING THEIR STRESS

For younger students, the biggest worries about starting secondary school include making friends, finding their way around a new environment, and having to establish multiple teacher-student relationships. [Research suggests](#) that this is one of the most stressful transitions for students during their education.

Older students obviously have different worries, with social status, for example, being [more of a focus for teenagers](#).

By paying close attention to students, teachers can better understand them and guide them towards more appropriate strategies. Helping students to develop a [sense of belonging](#) at the school is very important for both their well-being and achievement, and the quality of the teacher-student relationship is central to this.

REMOVE AMBIGUITY

Let's try a quick experiment. Imagine a scenario where I ask you a series of questions, and there are two possible outcomes to you getting the answers wrong: a) I will definitely give you a mild electric shock, or b) I may give you an electric shock. Which do you find more stressful? If you chose option two, you're in good company. Recent [research from University College London](#) found that those in the uncertain scenario experienced more stress.

It turns out that it's not the worst-case scenario that worries us the most – it's the not knowing. If we want to help students transition better between school years with less stress, we have to reduce uncertainty. Be explicit about what is and isn't acceptable behaviour – making sure you include a fair amount of repetition to ensure the messages get through – and talk clearly about good work habits and expectations.

PROVIDE BOTH CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT

Environments that help to foster resilience need to be high in [both challenge and support](#). Too much challenge and not enough support will result in excessive stress, burnout and isolation, while too much support but not enough challenge can lead to complacency and boredom.

[A study](#) of university students found that those who were able to keep a sense of perspective coped better with change. Therefore, the trick is to remind students of the big picture, i.e. that everything will turn out okay, while also giving them a short-term

strategy to focus on, i.e. what they should do next. Encouraging [support networks](#) is also important, to help students manage stressful situations.

Nerves are common in September, but not unavoidable.

FOSTER A GROWTH MINDSET

Researchers from Columbia University and Stanford University tracked teenagers over two years and found evidence to suggest that [a student's mindset](#) affected how well they managed these transitions. Those with an incremental or [growth mindset](#) were more likely to get higher grades, take on learning goals, value effort, and adopt positive coping strategies and were less likely to feel helpless than students with an entity or fixed mindset.

This is because if students believe they have a set amount of ability or intelligence, new situations can be stressful as they don't know if they will be able to cope with the new demands. If they believe they're able to improve their abilities, there is less fear because they know they can develop the skills required.

The good news for teachers is that a follow-up study by the same researchers suggests that this attitude can be taught and developed, reversing the decline in performance in students with a fixed mindset. Useful strategies include asking students [growth mindset questions](#) as well as subtly [weaving a growth culture](#) into daily classroom practice.

HOW IMPORTANT ARE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS?



How much does the relationship between students and their teacher matter? [An interesting meta-analysis](#), which collated the findings from hundreds of studies, found that classroom learning actually was not impacted by [how highly students rated their teachers](#). This suggests that, if teacher-student relationships do matter, their effects do not lie in popularity. So, what impact do teacher-student relationships have?

THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF GOOD TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Peer acceptance

Recent research found that teacher-student relationships have a profound impact on the way in which a student is perceived by their peers. When a classmate recognises that a student has a negative relationship with their teacher, they often take this to mean that the teacher does not accept the student. This can subsequently lead to classmates modelling the teacher's negative behaviour towards this student; hence they will too avoid engaging with them.

Peer rejection at a young age can lead to negative outcomes. For example it may cause a lack of self-esteem, which can affect how the student interacts with others outside the classroom. Therefore, it is extremely important that teachers try to build positive relationships with each of their students and that the classroom is seen as an inclusive environment.

High career expectations

[One particular study](#) sought to investigate the impact that teacher-student relationships have on career expectations. The researchers found that teachers and their students having positive relationships could enhance a student's [sense of belonging](#) and understanding of self, which in turn resulted in them setting higher career aspirations.

Having high careers aspirations and the self-belief that you can [improve and achieve](#) is essential for maximising success.

For example, [in a recent study](#), researchers asked participants to cycle as hard as they could for 4000m. Later, the participants were given the same instructions, but this time they had to ride against what they believed was an avatar of their previous ride. However, this avatar was actually going faster than they had before. Despite this, the participants kept pace. This shows that, if students are willing to push themselves and set high standards, it is likely they will achieve more.

Student engagement

[Recent research](#) has demonstrated that positive teacher-student relationships can increase student engagement. This is because when a student values and respects their teacher, they are more likely to strive for the goals and expectations that they have set for them, which can often only be achieved by interacting and engaging with the content taught in class.

Having students engaged in the lessons ensures that they are thinking deeply about the material being taught. As students tend to remember things that they think a lot about, this means that the key messages being taught are more likely to be [retrievable at a later date](#).

Teacher well-being

Teacher-student relationships are not only important for maximising development at school, but they can also have a profound impact on teacher well-being.

[Recent research found](#) that the higher the percentage of teacher-student relationships judged by the teacher to be negative, the higher the levels of stress and negative emotion that the teacher experiences.

**Positive relationships
impact much more
than student grades.**

[Teacher well-being](#) is a particular concern at the moment with [one in five teachers reporting](#) that they feel stressed about their job all or most of the time. Therefore, if strong teacher-student relationships help reduce negative affect then it's definitely something worth focusing on.

HOW TO IMPROVE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

We have written many blogs about ways to develop a better classroom environment. Here are some of the most important ones:

- [Can looping help your students?](#)
- [Psychological safety in the classroom](#)
- [Should teachers tell jokes in class?](#)
- [Should teachers greet students at the door?](#)
- [Do smaller class sizes make a difference?](#)

FINAL THOUGHT

Whilst some recent research has suggested that teacher-student relationships do not have an impact on student exam performance, it is essential that we take note of the majority of research that suggests the positive impact teacher-student relationships have on other aspects of school life.

For example, positive teacher-student relationships can impact a student's acceptance by their peers, the aspirations they set themselves and their engagement in class. Given that students spend over 1000 hours a year with their teachers, this makes a significant difference.

PSYCHOLOGICALLY SMART LESSONS



Every moment of a lesson matters. Each minute spent doing something that doesn't lead to learning is sixty seconds wasted. However, there are a lot of activities that occur in a lesson that likely do not lead to student development. Fortunately, emerging research is shining a light on what works in the classroom.

Through the use of cognitive research and our understanding of the science of learning, we can help accelerate learning. So, what does a psychologically smart lesson look like?

Ask pre-questions

Pre-questioning involves asking students questions before they learn the relevant information.

[A recent study](#) found that students who had been asked pre-questions not only learnt more about those topics, but also remembered the rest of the lesson better as well. This effect is thought to have occurred because such questioning focuses students and creates a sense of intrigue surrounding the information they're about to learn.

No fancy PowerPoint animations

Teachers often spend a lot of time jazzing up their PowerPoint presentations to include animations, music and sounds to help

keep their students engaged. However, [a recent study](#) actually found that students [learnt more from basic PowerPoints](#).

Essentially, the 'bells and whistles' of fancy animations often acted as a distraction, as the brain can only process a certain amount of information (and the extra stimuli takes up space that would otherwise be filled with valuable content).

Use both pictures and words

[Dual-coding theory](#) shows the power of combining both words and pictures in learning new material. [Research has found](#) that students who revised with this technique performed twice as well in a problem-solving task when compared with those who had revised with just words. This occurred because supplying the brain with both words and pictures means that it has two different ways to process the information.

Lots of quizzes

Teachers should include activities that use retrieval practice in their lessons. Retrieval practice, often referred to as the "testing effect", is where students complete an activity that forces them to recall information in order to generate an answer. [This could involve](#) quizzes, multiple choice tests, or simply getting students to answer questions. [Research has shown](#) that students who used retrieval practice remember information for longer.

This method can also protect students against the [negative effects that stress](#) can have on memory – with 72% of students reporting that retrieval practice made them [feel less nervous about](#) their upcoming exams.

Have students teach someone at the end

Recent research has demonstrated the effectiveness of getting students to teach each other at the end of a lesson. In [one particular study](#), 100 students were split into two groups. One group had to read a passage and were led to believe that they would later have to teach another student on its content, whilst another group were told that they would be tested on the passage.

The researchers found that students who had been expecting to teach the material to someone else remembered more of the

material such that they performed over 12% better in the test. They also stored the information in a more efficient way and were more likely to be able to recall the most important facts. Find out more about this technique in [our blog about the Protégé Effect](#).

Simple, research-based strategies can transform the way your students learn.

Set the right amount of homework

Teachers need to ensure that they get the right [balance with setting homework](#). Research investigating [7,451 teenagers in Spain](#) found that the regularity of homework being set is more important than the amount. Furthermore, students who spent 90 minutes a day doing homework achieved the highest grades.

However, they also found that the additional gains beyond setting 1 hour of homework a night probably did not justify the extra time that it took to complete it.

FINAL THOUGHT

There is a wealth of research out there that can help teachers plan and prepare the most effective lesson possible. Gimmicks and fads come and go - they often promise the world and then fail to deliver.

By being evidence-based and research-informed, it is easy to create a psychologically smart lesson that helps students realise their potential and maximise their learning. To dig deeper, we recommend:

- Our free email course "[The Science of Teaching and Learning](#)";
- Our best-selling book [The Science of Learning: 77 studies that every teacher needs to know](#);
- The [InnerDrive Online Academy](#) CPD modules.

HOW TO ENCOURAGE GOOD BEHAVIOUR IN YOUR CLASSROOM



Losing valuable teaching time to disruptive students? Don't worry, you're not alone. This is a common occurrence in many secondary schools, where students are finding ways to release their tensions. It is often in the form of troublesome behaviour and is seen in students of all genders and age groups. Teachers may struggle to find effective management strategies that students will respond to positively. Disciplining students can be a difficult task but research looking at deterrents and incentives suggests that, with the right strategies, it may be easier than it seems...

WHAT IS CONSIDERED "TROUBLESOME" BEHAVIOUR?

Adolescence is a stressful time and is often associated with a number of academic, social, and environmental stressors. This can cause tension in students that they may express by acting out in class. Students may exhibit disruptive behaviour in order to cope with the stress that comes along with the transition from childhood to adolescence.

When we think of troublesome behaviour, we often think of bullying and violence in the classroom. However, [research shows](#)

that the troublesome behaviours reported by students and teachers are usually not particularly serious in nature – it was their frequency that made them disruptive and problematic.

As perceived by teachers and students at [three different secondary schools](#), talking out of turn was the most troublesome and most frequent behaviour. This was in situations where either the teacher or a student was talking to the class. Many teachers found this to be disruptive as it distracted other students and left less classroom time to teach content.

[88% of secondary school teachers](#) indicated that the most troublesome student in the classroom was male. A gender gap in discipline can be seen in many schools, with male students more often the target of teachers attempts to control and return order to the classroom – teachers sometimes subconsciously [treat boys and girls differently](#) in their classroom. This can have negative effects on both groups.

For example, [labelling a boy as the “classroom clown”](#) may seem trivial. However, it can lead to more troublesome behaviour from the student as a way to confirm the stereotype: having a role in the classroom can seem attractive (especially to younger students) and sometimes encourage them to act up, leading to a disruptive environment.

HOW TO MANAGE TROUBLESOME BEHAVIOUR IN YOUR CLASSROOM

There are countless strategies you can use in the classroom to manage behaviours and get students back on track. However, both students and teachers agree that too much time is spent trying to manage classroom disruptions. It is important to understand which strategies are the most effective so that, when disruptive behaviour does present itself, it can be easily managed. This will ensure that you waste less time getting order back in the classroom and spend more time teaching content.

Students are likely to repeat a behaviour if it is rewarded and are

Mindfulness is more than a gimmick. It leads to self-awareness and improved well-being.

likewise less likely to repeat it when disciplined. Using this knowledge to your advantage, the strategies you can use can be separated into two categories:

- Deterrents that will discourage troublesome behaviour;
- Incentives that will encourage appropriate behaviour.

Deterrents

[Research suggests](#) that the most effective deterrents to troublesome behaviour are:

- Being sent to the principal's office
- Getting detention
- Getting an unfavourable report sent home

These are considered to be the most effective because they have consequences, in particular because they affect the disruptive student's activities. Getting a detention means missing a lunch break or having to stay back after school, which may force students to miss out on spending time with their friends or attending after school activities.

Sending a bad report to the student's home can also be effective when they act out. This may be because their parents are likely to disapprove and may lead to further punishment at home, such as being grounded or taking away video game privileges.

Having faced negative consequences, these strategies may encourage students to think twice before causing trouble in the classroom again.

Incentives

[More than 50% of students](#) at each year level favoured free time and a positive letter being sent home as incentives. Students also improved their behaviour when they received a good mark and a positive academic report was sent to their parents. If students know that they will be rewarded for their good behaviour in these ways, then they are likely to engage in less troublesome behaviour.

Students want to feel important and valued for their efforts. [Research suggests](#) that celebrating the positives can improve behaviour and compliance in the classroom. Private praise

and reprimands are seen as effective means for increasing appropriate behaviour. In fact, they are seen as more effective than when praise or reprimands are made publicly. When teachers give genuine praise that is specific to the student and is well-deserved, it encourages them to continue learning and behaving well. It can also enhance their [sense of belonging](#) in the classroom and lead to more confident and motivated learners.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Understanding the most effective deterrents and incentives that can encourage students to adapt their behaviour can help teachers develop management strategies to create a positive and uplifting classroom environment.

Knowing which methods are effective for managing troublesome behaviour in their students can help teachers waste less time they could be spending teaching material. However, it is also important to remember that students want their good behaviour to be acknowledged and rewarded. In doing so, teachers can help develop motivated learners.

WHY YOU SHOULD TEACH YOUR STUDENTS ABOUT NEUROPLASTICITY



Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to adapt and change throughout an individual's life. Research has shown that the brain is constantly re-shaping, re-wiring and changing itself. Therefore, everything we do, from practising a skill, to reading a blog or kicking a football has an impact on our brain.

Unfortunately, many people still have a perception that their brain (and therefore their abilities) are fixed. That what we're born with determines how well we do. However, years of neuroscience research have shown us that is not true – and also that being aware of the brain's malleability can have very positive consequences.

WHY TEACH STUDENTS ABOUT NEUROPLASTICITY?

Growth Mindset, Motivation and Attitude to Learning

[A meta-analysis](#) which looked at the findings of 10 different studies found that teaching students about the neuroplasticity of the brain induces a growth mindset, which in turn leads to improvements in students' motivations to learn.

There were also positive effects in terms of students' academic achievement, in regards to reading but also in particular maths, an effect that was most prominent [amongst struggling students](#). This effect likely occurred because struggling students often wrongly believe that success in maths is a result of a "natural" talent that you are either born with or without, causing them not to put any effort into maths.

Enhances Student Revision

The vast amount of information that students have to be [able to recall for exams](#) is often a source of demotivation, as they believe that they will never learn all the material, no matter how many hours they spend revising.

However, teaching students about the neuroplasticity of their brain should help install a belief that effective revision is possible. They would then know that if they put in the necessary effort and practice (using strategies [such as retrieval practice](#)), their brain will be able to adapt and make new connections, allowing them to learn and recall lots of new information – more than they previously thought they could.

The brain's ability to do this was recently demonstrated in surprising [research that followed black cab drivers](#) who had been learning and practicing 320 different routes through London to pass a test known as [the Knowledge](#). When compared to control groups, they showed enhanced myelination in the brain – which means that they could process new information more efficiently as a result of practice.

Improved Response to Mistakes

The brain is programmed to have one of two different responses to mistakes:

- The first is when the brain sees a mistake as a problem that needs solving and hence focuses its attention on it. This means that the brain comes to better recognise and understand mistakes so that, if a similar situation were to arise again, the brain will have learnt from the previous mistake and will be better placed to avoid it occurring again.
- The second response is a negative one, where the brain

perceives a mistake as a threat and tries to block out or ignore it, in order to protect itself from any negative emotions that may arise.

Research has found that when individuals believe that their brain is malleable (as they often do when they understand the neuroplasticity of the brain), they are more likely to experience the first response and hence see mistakes as an opportunity to learn and improve. On the other hand, when an individual believes that their abilities are fixed (and hence does not understand neuroplasticity), the second response is more likely to occur. As a result, students may repeat the same mistakes over and over again without learning from them and attribute their failure to a lack of ability.

Students can only benefit from knowing how their brain works, grows and learns.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Teaching students about the neuroplasticity of the brain can have a range of positive impacts on them. It can be very motivating to know that their brain is developing and improving and that they can help accelerate this process.

This will hopefully lead to less students disengaging from certain subjects as 'they don't have the right brain for it'. As well as sparking a love of learning, it can also lead to an improvement in how they think about themselves and their future abilities.

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