

Connection First:

A Giant List of Ideas to Build Trust with Students

Building trust isn't about one strategy—it's about consistent, everyday actions that show students they matter. This guide is organized to make it easy to find ideas that fit your students' ages, needs, and classroom rhythms.

What You'll Find Inside: Playful strategies for younger students, choice-driven approaches for older students, and universal trust-building practices like co-regulation, consistency, and community repair—designed to help all students feel seen, valued, and connected.

Every student is different. Use this list as a jumping-off point to customize ideas based on students' strengths, talents, and preferences. Remember: trust takes time, and connection is not a one-time event—it's a daily practice.

CONNECTION STRATEGIES FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS (PREK-GRADE 5)

- 1. Name Rituals** – Greet each child daily with their name + a playful gesture or voice.
- 2. Hand Signal Hellos** – Let students choose a hand signal greeting (wave, heart, peace, etc.).
- 3. Class Mascot Adventures** – Send home a stuffed class mascot and have families “journal” their adventures.

CONNECTION STRATEGIES FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS (PREK-GRADE 5)

- 4. Personalized Morning Bins** – Add their favorite puzzles, books, or toys to morning welcome bins.
- 5. Emotion Check-In Charts** – Use Velcro visuals so students can show how they feel as they enter.
- 6. Compliment Circles** – Build daily practice giving and receiving kind words.
- 7. Show & Tell (But Cooler)** – Let students bring in “something that makes them happy.”
- 8. Storytime Shout-Outs** – Mention students' names or traits in your stories.
- 9. Mini-Me Drawings** – Help students create “mini versions” of themselves to display in the room.
- 10. Class Jobs with Meaning** – Give students jobs based on what they're good at (e.g., kindness captain).
- 11. Draw Together** – Join students at the art table just to create beside them.
- 12. Teach Me Something Time** – Let them teach YOU how to draw a Pokémon, tie a shoe, or do a dance.
- 13. Lunchtime Buddy System** – Sit and eat with a different student each week.

CONNECTION STRATEGIES FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS (PREK-GRADE 5) CONTINUED

14. Gratitude Jar – Add a marble or note each time a positive moment happens.

15. Birthday Spotlights – Celebrate the whole week with small joys they choose.

16. ‘Remember When’ Reflections – Tell short stories about something positive they did in the past.

CONNECTION STRATEGIES FOR OLDER STUDENTS (GRADES 6-12)

1. Music Swaps – Ask them to recommend a song and genuinely listen to it.

2. Sticky Note Surprises – Leave private notes of encouragement in desks, lockers, or folders.

3. Quick Polls or “This or That” Games – Start class with silly (or deep) questions they get to vote on.

4. Let Them Lead – Ask students to plan part of a lesson or run a class routine.

5. Use Their Language – Reference memes, YouTube, TikTok, or games they love.

6. Create Personal Goals Together – Not about grades—about dreams, interests, or leadership.

CONNECTION STRATEGIES FOR OLDER STUDENTS (GRADES 6-12) CONTINUED

- 7. Tell Them What You Notice** – “I saw how you helped them... That shows leadership.”
- 8. Choice-Driven Assignments** – Let them show learning through music, art, drama, or games.
- 9. Write With Them** – Join them in journaling or creative writing prompts.
- 10. Low-Key Hangout Time** – Invite them to lunch or advisory for a game or casual talk.
- 11. Compliment in Passing** – Say something kind *without* a huge spotlight moment.
- 12. Weekly Shout-Out Board** – Let students celebrate each other anonymously.
- 13. Start Class with Chill Time** – 3 minutes of lo-fi music, doodling, or breathing.
- 14. Co-Create a Class Playlist** – Each student adds a favorite song (school-appropriate).
- 15. Personal Interests Surveys** – Use their responses to tailor content and conversations.
- 16. Acknowledge the Hustle** – “I know you’ve been showing up even when it’s hard. I see you.”

IDEAS THAT WORK FOR ALL AGES

- 1. Be Consistent** – Show up, every day, with your calm, open energy.
- 2. Circle Time / Community Circles** – Regular, predictable time for personal check-ins.
- 3. Daily Connection Goals** – Choose 1–2 students each day to deeply connect with.
- 4. Student Interest Walls** – A visual way to celebrate everyone’s passions.
- 5. Eye Contact + Names** – Simple, powerful. Say their names. Look them in the eyes.
- 6. 2-Minute Chats** – Brief, non-academic convos with students you’re struggling to reach.
- 7. Co-Regulation Moments** – Let students borrow your calm through breath, tone, or presence.
- 8. Repair, Don’t Retaliate** – If there’s conflict, model healthy restoration instead of punishment.
- 9. Celebrate Growth, Not Perfection** – “You paused before reacting today. That matters.”
- 10. Laugh Together** – Nothing builds trust faster than sharing a genuine laugh.