

APPROACHES TO EXPRESSING CARE



We may care deeply about our students or youth, but they may not see or experience that care, particularly if we're not good at expressing it. Consider the following everyday actions—some that you likely already do—that communicate that you value each young person, and help young people come to know they can trust you. Which approaches do you see being most valuable and feasible for you and the young people you see regularly?

The Joke's On Me

School can be a tense and overwhelming place for many young people. When teachers are “too serious” or stern, it can demotivate students. One of the best ways to make them comfortable, students say, is when teachers can both “take a joke and make a joke about themselves.” Bringing humor into the classroom eases tension and builds trust, so students feel more like they can be themselves.

Source: A Search Institute longitudinal study of middle and high school teacher-student relationships

- 1. Learn names:** Learn names and how to pronounce them quickly and correctly soon after you meet young people. Politely correct others who mispronounce young people's names. It may seem like such a simple thing, but greeting young people by their name (correctly) can often make a big difference in helping them know that you care about them. This can be especially powerful and important for young people from cultural backgrounds that are different from yours.
- 2. Use correct pronouns:** Share your own pronouns when introducing yourself and encourage young people to share their pronouns as well. Use the pronouns young people use for themselves and politely correct others who misgender them. If you use name badges in your program, include pronouns on name tags. Use “they/them” as default pronouns rather than assuming someone else's pronouns.
- 3. Listen actively:** When a young person is talking, give them your undivided attention and demonstrate your interest in what they have to say through eye contact (unless you are in a culture where that is not appropriate), nodding, and asking clarifying questions. Young people notice when adults are only half listening while checking their phones. Revisit topics young people bring up to demonstrate that you remembered what they had to say. “Hey, didn't you have a game last weekend? How did it go?”
- 4. Share stories:** It may feel vulnerable to you, but youth love to hear about how you came to be the person you are today. Share information about your life (within appropriate boundaries, of course) and connect your experiences to what young people are going through today. This sense of shared experience can powerfully strengthen interpersonal connections.

5. **Build trust:** Unless you are concerned about a behavior that needs to be shared with another professional, keep what young people tell you in confidence. During Search Institute focus groups, young people have told us it breaks trust if they feel that “the adults talk about us behind our back” in a negative way. Be sure to follow through on the things you say you will do. If for some reason you can’t keep your promise, take time to explain why and, if appropriate, apologize.
6. **Check in:** Periodically ask young people how they are doing. Note if you see a marked difference in their behavior; “Hey, you seem a bit down today, do you want to talk?” If you learn that a young person is struggling with something during one of these check ins, be sure to proactively check in again with that young person to see how things are going.
7. **Offer advice carefully:** If a young person opens up to you about a challenge they are facing, give the young person a chance to describe what happened, tell you how they are feeling, or just vent before you offer advice or guidance. Ask if they would like your input on how to address the situation.
8. **Smile and laugh:** Use humor and model a positive attitude. Try not to be serious all of the time. Goof around with young people, and be willing to make fun of yourself. Young people appreciate when adults have a positive attitude and can have fun with them.
9. **Be a cheerleader:** Celebrate a young person’s success or accomplishments in the way they most appreciate. Some people prefer public recognition; others prefer private recognition or having their success shared with just a few close friends or family members. Let them know that you recognize effort and minor achievements, too.
10. **Show up:** Attend sporting events, concerts, presentations, graduations, and other activities that matter to young people. If you tell a young person you’ll be coming to an event, do all that you can to be there. Youth have told us this means a lot to them!

How’s It Going?

Some young people don’t “click” with a group right away. They may tend to spend more time on their own. For those running immersive or long-term programs, especially in environments that are new for youth, it’s important to keep young people safe and let them know you care, while respecting their desire for some space. A wilderness camp coordinator described checking in with campers “who may be the outliers from the group.” They noted, “It does require a balance of respect for their space and checking in with them,... being able to judge when you need to... say, ‘Hey, how’s it going?’ and, if they’re not too chatty, just let them be, if that’s how they’re comfortable.”

Source: A Search Institute case study of a middle-school wilderness leadership camp.



Blend Elements: Express Care & Share Power

Show care and mutual respect by owning your mistakes, and talking about them. As one young person explained about an adult they look up to, “I love how they share their mistakes, as well, so it’s like they understand. . . it makes me feel like they do understand the situation I’m going through.”