Answers to Exercise 2.4

Building Positive Teacher-Student and Peer Relationships

1. Mr. Briggs usually gets the chance to talk with his students’ families at the school’s Back to School Night. However, Rodney’s mother did not attend Back to School Night, so Mr. Briggs calls her at home on an evening Rodney said she would be home. She tells him that Rodney has recently been diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, and that while they are doing what they can to get him all the help he needs, he still has a bit of a hard time socially at school. “He loves math,” she says. “He loves chess, too. Puzzles of any kind fascinate him.” After learning this information, Mr. Briggs watches out for Rodney. Sometimes he makes eye contact with Rodney so he knows he is as important as the other students; sometimes they have lunch together and do puzzles. When a fellow teacher decides to form a chess club, Mr. Briggs talks to Rodney and encourages him to join. He also talks to Rodney’s mother once a week to get updates and see if there is anything else he can do to help.

This classroom scenario depicts a teacher building a relationship with a student by eliciting information from the student’s parents, attending to the student’s special needs, and showing affection through eye contact. Had Mr. Briggs not spoken with Rodney’s mother he might not have known about Rodney’s condition. The knowledge helps him understand and attend to Rodney’s needs by spending some alone time with him and suggesting the chess club. It also lets him know that Rodney might need more encouragement and support than other students during class, so Mr. Briggs should make frequent eye contact to show affection.

2. After greeting her students by name as they come into class, Ms. Landis asks her students, as she does every Monday, if there is anything they would like to change about their personal profiles. The personal profiles are placed around the room and feature photos of each student as well as pictures or illustrations of hobbies, pets, friends, or anything else the student finds important. After taking a few minutes to allow students to add to or change their profiles, the class gets into small groups to continue work on a class project. Ms. Landis circulates the room to monitor progress, and when a student has questions or comments she kneels beside his or her chair to talk. She finds that some of her more soft-spoken students will open up a little more if she is closer and at eye level with them.
This classroom scenario depicts the use of a teacher building relationships with students through the use of a structured opportunity for students to highlight their accomplishments. It also illustrates a teacher showing affection through physical proximity. By encouraging her students to display profiles about themselves, Ms. Landis helps the whole class get to know one another, and by kneeling next to shyer students, she is letting them know she is interested in what they have to say.

3. While in search of information about his new students, Mr. Heim asks another teacher about a student named Li. The teacher says Li is a bully and will likely try to hurt other students. During a private meeting with Li, Mr. Heim asks him to share a little bit about himself. Li tells him that the last school year was his first at this school, and it was tough for him. Mr. Heim asks why, and Li tells him that he didn’t know anyone when he moved here and that where he comes from, kids have to prove they are tough to make friends and be respected. “I don’t think it’s like that here,” Li says, “but it took me a while to figure it out. Now most of the kids are afraid of me.” Mr. Heim tells Li he will do what he can to help him make some friends, and later shares his conversation with the teacher he originally spoke with. “He is not a bully,” Mr. Heim says. “He just didn’t know how to fit in. The rules at his old school don’t apply here. I think we should give him a chance before making assumptions; negative presumptions will only make life harder for him.”

This classroom scenario depicts the use of a teacher building a relationship with a student through eliciting information about him from other teachers. Mr. Heim is also listening to Li’s concerns and extinguishing a negative conversation about Li with another teacher. Mr. Heim finds out about Li’s reputation from another teacher but listens to what Li has to say about his own past behavior. After listening, Mr. Heim is better able to respond to the teacher who told him about Li’s reputation and turns the conversation to a positive instead of negative tone.

4. Ms. Ballard is a physical education teacher. In the beginning of the year, she likes to initiate a class discussion in which she asks students what their favorite sports are and what kinds of games and sports they would like to learn. Over the course of the year, she tries to fit in as many requests as possible, asking the students who made the requests to assist during that unit. She uses high and low fives to encourage her assistants as well as all of her other students and sometimes uses elaborate handshakes she and the students make up.

This classroom scenario depicts a teacher building relationships with students through the use of physical gestures and class discussions designed to allow students to share information about themselves. Ms. Ballard’s students know she is interested in what they like and dislike because she initiates a class discussion about it and does her best to accommodate students’ requests. They also know she supports them because she offers encouraging gestures like the high five.
5. Mr. Fuentes learns from Gage’s mother that he recently lost a grandfather to whom he was very close. Mr. Fuentes knows Gage won’t want to talk much about it at school, but he wants to show that he recognizes his student is going through a hard time. When he sees Gage in the hallway or as he is coming or going from class, Mr. Fuentes simply puts his hand on Gage’s shoulder and gives him a smile.

This classroom scenario depicts a teacher building a relationship with a student by using appropriate physical contact and eliciting information from the student’s parent. Had he not spoken with Gage’s mother, Mr. Fuentes may not have known his student was going through a tough time. Mr. Fuentes can now simply put his hand on Gage’s back or give a smile to offer subtle support.