



## A Simple Way To Build Rapport With Difficult Students

by Michael Linsin on September 8, 2012

Difficult students behave the way they do because somewhere along the line the ball was dropped.

Standards were lowered. Rules were ignored. Excuses were made. Relationships were broken – or were never developed to begin with.

But fate has intervened.

And it has been left to you to pick up the ball. Indeed, you are the right person, at the right time, and in the right place.

To start you'll want to hold them to the same rules, standards, and expectations as everybody else – no exceptions. You must decide that no matter what, you'll be remembered for this.

*"Mrs. Jones never let me slide. She always believed in me."*

The next step is to begin building rapport – though gently at first. For building rapport is about trust. It's about truth and honesty and making a connection that has the power to change behavior. It can't be rushed, forced, or wrestled to the ground like an opponent.

Coming on too strong is a common mistake. *"Hey Anthony! What's up, dude! Got your backpack all zipped up, lookin' good? Awesome! Put'er there, mojambo!"* No, with difficult students it pays to be more subtle.

Remember, these are students who've heard it all and been subjected to every shortsighted strategy under the sun – from fire-breathing scoldings to flat-out bribery. Understandably, they're guarded and skeptical of too-forward, too-familiar adults.

To reach them, you must go in through the side door.

One of [the most effective ways to do this is with a simple note](#), written in your hand, folded over, and taped to the top or side of their desk. You can leave it while they're at recess or lunch, or after they leave for the day. What you say in your note is less important than its genuineness. For if you don't truly believe what you say, your students will find you out. The idea is to begin building a relationship organically – one based on trust and likeability.

False praise and manipulation will backfire every time. So keep it simple, brief, and understated, and make sure it reflects how you really feel.

*I'm glad you're a member of this class, Reese. I look forward to getting to know you and your many talents.*

*Anthony, I believe in you, and I know that this year you can be the excellent student you want to be.*

You mustn't mention the note to the student and it's best not to watch them while they read it. Allow them their moment of privacy, while you move on with your day. Chances are they will approach you to say thank you – but not always.

If they do, say simply, *"I meant what I said. I thought you should know."*

There is no need to make any more of it than that.

You won't use these notes every day or even every week. You'll use them once or twice during the first couple of weeks and then only when it feels right. Fortunately, effective classroom management [isn't a robotic series of steps](#).

The nuances of teaching – the relationships, the shared moments, the private victories – are where you'll find the greatest pleasure and meaning.

An oft-repeated phrase on this website is that there is no magic to your classroom management plan. And it's true. Your rules and consequences, although critically important, in and of themselves don't have the power to change behavior.

The magic is in your relationship with your students.

And these little notes, appearing out of nowhere, raining down like pixie dust on the unexpected, spread your influence beyond the well-behaved, the self-assured, and the aiming-to-please and into the hearts of your most challenging students.

They break down barriers, they draw students in, and they connect you in ways that face-to-face interactions cannot.

Many difficult students have such an unfavorable view of teachers that simply approaching them causes their defenses to go up. And because of their bad relationships with teachers in the past, they see them as all alike.

This is why they can be so disrespectful before even getting to know you.

A simple note, though, just between the two of you, has a way of cutting through their negative views of school and of teachers. It cuts through the layers of bad blood, grudges, private hurts, and distrust.

And touches a soft spot.

A place they can't ignore.

A place that opens a line of rapport that has the power to change behavior.