



Creating a Conscious Invitation into Relationship

Written by Hannah Beach (February 13, 2020)

<https://hannahbeach.ca/creating-a-conscious-invitation-into-relationship/>

There is a lot of discussion about the importance of relationship in education – for good reason! Building relationships with our students is a vital part of creating emotionally safe learning communities.

I am so grateful to Dr. Gordon Neufeld for developing an accessible and intuitive language around priming and preserving relationships. He speaks about “collecting, bridging, and match-making” as being the three basic attachment rituals. I remember the first time I heard him speak about ‘collecting’ as an attachment ritual, I was struck not only by the intuitiveness of this ritual but also by the word itself. I thought of our cultural saying, ‘I need to collect myself’ – which for me always meant a coming back to myself, a conscious return to myself.

The word ‘collecting’ resonated with me as such a perfect word for this invitation we offer to children, as it conjures the image of drawing them in.

In an era of disconnection, these attachment rituals are of such importance. Creating conscious invitations into a relationship are needed so that we can integrate relationship-building practices into our daily work to help our students feel connected to us. These practices also allow us to create the emotional safety that our students need, in order for them to learn, grow and discover their best selves.

So, what is collecting?

“Collecting” is likely something most of us already do instinctively—so instinctively that many of us haven’t had a name for it, until now.

When we “collect” a child, we are making a conscious effort to connect with that child so that they feel comfortable with us. Parents often collect their children across the day in many different ways—from little greeting rituals after being apart for a period of time (like a morning hug or an after-school

snack together to chat about the day) to intentional activities to build a connection (like reading a book together or shooting hoops).

Even as adults, most of us rely on rituals that allow us to reconnect with each other after being apart. It seems we instinctively know that greeting one another after having been away from each other—whether it be a simple “Good morning!” or a “How was your day?”—is an important part of being in a relationship.

Many educators instinctively collect their students at the beginning of each class. Some might greet each child individually every morning with a hello or a handshake. Others may start with a joke of the day or some other ritual that is intended to welcome students back to class before their day begins. This type of collecting serves not only as a welcome but also as a way to reconnect with our students, on a human level, and send the underlying message: “Hey, I am here for you! You are now in class, here to learn, and I am here to teach you. We are in this together.”

Collecting students is not the same as a call and response strategy, which teachers often use to get the attention of students when they are not listening. **Collecting is about more than trying to get their attention.** Collecting is about activating, or reactivating, connection and relationship. The fact is, collected children are more likely to listen to us, which means our classroom will be easier to manage. But that is not the primary benefit of collecting our students—it is a helpful side effect.

The reason that collected children listen to us and are “easier” to teach is that they feel more connected to us and therefore more emotionally safe with us. This feeling of safety makes it more likely that they will follow our lead and be open to our instruction. When students feel safe, they are more likely to put up their hands in response to our questions, take creative risks with our encouragement, try new things under our watch, and be willing to make mistakes. **And when our students feel even more comfortable and at ease in our presence, it can expand their capacity to explore other perspectives without needing to hold so firmly to their own ideas.**

Strategies for collecting our students

There is no single or right way to collect our students. Every teacher and every group of students is unique. The key is to develop and implement rituals—from simply saying “good morning” to each student as they walk into class to more creative routines—that feel true and comfortable to who we are as teachers and as individuals.

One teacher I know—let’s call her Deirdre—has a unique daily collecting routine. Deirdre is quite artsy, dresses in colourful clothing, and wears reading glasses that are just as colourful and splashy. She developed her collecting routine quite organically, when her students began to notice that her glasses always matched her outfits. At the beginning of each school year, Deirdre places a large basket of her glasses on her desk. In the basket are about thirty-five pairs of glasses in various colours and patterns—everything from zebra print to polka dots. She makes a chart with each child listed alphabetically, with their name matched to the class date. Each morning, the child whose name is listed for that day gets to select which glasses Deirdre will wear. Some children take extra care to select something that matches her outfit perfectly, while others think it is very funny to select glasses that don’t match her outfit at all. It is all done in good humour, and this fun morning ritual is something her class looks forward to each day. In five minutes, Deirdre helps her students feel more connected to her, have fun together, and get ready to learn.

There are many other ways to collect our students. For example, in my work with teens, I often start each class with a short “weather report.”

Here’s how it works.

Everyone (including me) sits in a circle. I ask each student in the circle to describe what kind of weather best describes how they feel that day. One might say, “Stormy” or “Full of rainbows!” or “Sunny, with a chance of showers.” This gives me a window into where each student is at that day, without having to know exactly what is going on.

The “weather report” might be a suitable collecting activity for groups of students where there is already some atmosphere of trust. In other groups, it might be better to stick with a collecting routine that is simpler and requires less trust to already have been established, like a joke of the day or like Deirdre’s glasses routine.

But no matter what, it is important to open each class with a short, engaging collecting experience, and for us as educators to take part in it as well.

Collect before you direct

Collecting is also important at other key times. For example, one of the most frustrating things is dealing with students who aren't listening, whether they are in their own little world or are deliberately ignoring us. As tempting as it might be in these moments to become louder, use a harsher tone of voice, or revert to punishment, it is far more effective to work on connecting with our students at their level. In other words, at these times, it's important to keep in mind the mantra collect before you direct. And this does not require anything complicated. All you really have to do is enter into their world in a respectful manner. Depending on a child's age and personality, you can:

- crouch down next to their desk, make eye contact, and smile, and then make a bit of small talk about whatever currently has their attention
- warmly touch them on the shoulder to get their attention if they seem lost in thought
- make an attempt at eye contact, give them a nod or a thumbs-up when giving instructions from the front of the room
- empathize with the fact that they might not feel like reading or working on math or cleaning up their desk at the moment—that you understand that it can be hard to do things that you don't feel like doing. And then, once you sense some connection, tell them again, gently but firmly, that it is time to do so anyway

I know it can feel frustrating for us to have to do this. But some children are so internally scattered that they cannot adhere to a task without first being grounded in the present moment—and the best way to bring their minds back into the classroom is to help them refocus on their relationship with us.

Furthermore, by collecting students in this manner before asking them to do something again, we can avoid putting them in an adversarial position and reduce the likelihood that they will be resistant. Taking a few moments to connect with them at their level, in a manner that shows them that we are attuned to their needs, increases the likelihood that students will be willing participants in the classroom.

If you are interested in learning more about attachment rituals rooted in the relational and developmental approach of Dr. Gordon Neufeld, then stay

tuned as my next few posts will explore the attachment rituals of bridging and matchmaking and how we can use these in our classrooms to preserve and extend connection. You can also visit the Neufeld Institute to learn more.

I'd love to hear about the collecting rituals you enjoy with the children in your care! Let's share ideas!

Warmly,

Hannah Beach



Hannah Beach is an award-winning educator, author, and keynote speaker. She was recognized by the Canadian Human Rights Commission in 2017 as one of five featured change-makers in Canada. She is the co-author of *Reclaiming Our Students: Why Children Are More Anxious, Aggressive, and Shut Down Than Ever—And What We Can Do About It* (released April 2020). She delivers professional development services across the country and provides emotional health consulting to schools.

Find her online at <https://hannahbeach.ca>

Copyright Hannah Beach

Hannah Beach, author of *Reclaiming Our Students* and the book series *I Can Dance*, member of the Neufeld Institute, as well as director of **Emotional Growth for Children**, a counselling and family resource center. For more information, please visit www.hannahbeach.ca and www.neufeldinstitute.org