



The Art of Bridging: How it can keep relationship alive even while disciplining

Written by Hannah Beach (February 20, 2020)

<https://hannahbeach.ca/the-art-of-bridging/>

In my last blog about *collecting*, I spoke about how creating a conscious invitation into relationship is a vital part of creating emotionally safe learning communities. It is relationship that helps children to feel safe with us. It is through relationship that their hearts can soften, that they may want to follow our lead, and truly feel like who they are as unique and individual people, matters.

However, sometimes when we discipline a child, they can worry that we no longer like them. They might wonder if we now think that they are “bad” and decide to pull away from us, causing our relationship to erode. And when the relationship erodes, a child’s willingness to be led by us weakens. They might give up, feel embarrassed or awkward, and will need to feel a warm invitation from us back into relationship.

Therefore, whenever we have to discipline a student, we must also take care to ensure that they feel safe in their relationship with us. **We must take care to build a ‘bridge’ over the discipline itself that allows them to find their way to their relationship with us.** Developmental psychologist Dr. Gordon Neufeld, uses the term ‘bridging’ to speak to how we can preserve relationship with the children in our care. He delves into this construct beautifully in his book, *Hold On to Your Kids*.

What might bridging look like?

Imagine that a child feels connected to us and then we have to correct them for some behavioural issue. When we intentionally reconnect the child to us, this is called making a bridge. These bridges are important in keeping the relationship alive and keeping the kids who are “messing up” connected to us. Without a bridge, they may be left hanging, disconnected from us. We must indicate to the student that our relationship is more important than the fact that we have had to tell them “No!” or stop them from doing something or discipline

them in another way. They need to know that we still like them and see them as a good person.

We don't even have to say this out loud. A simple wink, smile or thumbs-up at a later point in class is enough to let the student know we are still on good terms. We still like them and don't think they're a "bad" kid. We're good.

This is especially important for at-risk students, particularly if their transgressions have required more severe disciplinary action, like suspension. If a student has been suspended from school, coming back can be a real challenge for them. Their hearts might have hardened even more while away. Usually, these very challenged kids aren't offered a bridge back into a relationship with their teachers. In fact, these kids often return to statements that make them feel unwelcome: "Well, I hope you learned something. You'd better not do that again. I'm watching you."

But this kind of approach will likely only exacerbate the behaviour. To have any hope that a student will not simply repeat the same transgressions, we need to let them know that we welcome them back, that we are happy to have them back. **We need to give them room for something different to emerge.**

Some schools already take steps to do this, with the principal reaching out personally to create a bridge, since the principal is also the one who typically suspends a student. The principal might say something like, "Being away must have been hard for you. You probably feel kind of mad right now. And it also might feel awkward returning. You did do some things that were not okay, but that is now in the past. I also see how much good you have in you. I want you to know that I am happy to have you back." This bridge creates a lot more room for growth than what is often said to these most challenged students upon their return.

There are even some school principals who visit the suspended student in their home when they are away from school, bringing over homework and goodies. This extra effort provides an opportunity for the relationship to stay strong and indicates to the student that the principal really cares about them, making more room for the child's heart to soften and behaviour to potentially shift. This is not about rewarding a student for misbehaviour. It's about recognizing that in order to potentially shift this student (which may also make

the school safer) by creating a bridge back into relationship, we can create more room for actual change to occur.

Leave no child hanging – keeping the connection alive

I was a sensitive child, who needed these bridges back to my teachers in order to feel safe. If my teachers ever raised their voices or seemed upset with me, I needed them to let me know they still saw me as a good person. That we were still OK. So, when I first became conscious of the attachment ritual of bridging, I realized that I could instill this practice to help my students to feel safe with me, even through challenging times. I placed a paperweight with the image of a bridge on it, on my desk as my reminder to leave no child hanging, and that it was my job as my student's caring leader to make sure they felt the path back to me after an experience of disconnection. Connection trumps everything and by offering these warm bridges back to us, we can help to preserve it and keep it alive.

Warmly,
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