



CONNECTION TIPS

Creating Positive Learning Spaces for Middle and High School Students

What's Going On?

Young people are not made to learn apart, and may struggle with being at a distance from their peers. During these challenging times, whether your classroom is entirely or partly online, finding opportunities for collaboration and joy will be of paramount importance in keeping your older learners tuned in.

Tips to Consider

- ❑ Now more than ever, focus on developing and maintaining strong relationships to the students in your class. During disrupted times, relationships are a protective factor and they are what will keep students showing up – whether in person or online.
- ❑ Create opportunities to students to form relationships with one another. Whether its through get-to-know-you activities, opportunities for sharing, group conversations, or team projects, young people need the space and the structure to stay in touch with each other. Some ideas for get-to-know-me activities are:
 - Gallery walls (encourage students to make picture walls of images that represent their interests, talents, hobbies, families, and dreams.
 - “Bring 3 items to the screen” – set a short time limit for students to grab three items that fit a particular theme or answer a question
 - Online talent show – consider inviting buddy classrooms or families to view your students’ many hidden talents! With some planning, talent shows are great opportunities to build community
 - Celebrity Squares – lean into the grid format of virtual learning spaces and embrace old gameshow formats for answering questions, brainstorming, or collaboration.
- ❑ Establish morning rituals. Lean into morning meetings, or block off 10 minutes for students to submit a link/song/video/quote to share. Creating consistent, scheduled time to come together each morning will get your students up and onto the computer more reliably than jumping right into content.
- ❑ Try to make it fun! Whenever you can, work in opportunities for fun during your teaching and during student group work. Some ideas are:
 - Bingo sheets – Either as a content review, vocabulary expansion, or poking fun of your own speech patterns, Bingo sheets give kids a reason to listen closely
 - Theme days – brainstorm funny theme days for online learning and create a schedule so kids have time to prep. Themes could be: wear a funny hat, create a new Zoom background, talk like a pirate, or be linked to content.
 - Around the House Scavenger Hunts – Set a short time limit for students to find items linked to a theme (discussing the Civil War? Find two items a soldier would have had in his backpack. Discussing trigonometry? Find a sphere, an isosceles triangle, and a rectangle).

- ❑ Movement Matters. Make sure to incorporate movement breaks often, and provide variable ideas. Students can jog in place, do jumping jacks, burpees, or yoga. Encourage movement during transitions. Remember that modeling the movement yourself is a great way to get young people engaged (but feel free to leave the burpees to those energetic teenagers!)
- ❑ Share your schedule – Be open and honest with your class about the content you need to cover, and your plan for getting it done. Encourage students to reflect on the schedule and if it seems achievable to them – and listen to their ideas. Creating this kind of buy-in helps keep kids engaged, even when distance learning, and gives them increased responsibility for their own learning.
- ❑ Dust off those rubrics or create new ones – Rubrics are another excellent way to create buy-in and genuine learning. For group projects or large assignments, create opportunities for students to meet with you and reflect where they think they are on a grading rubric, and where you think they are. Give and solicit honest feedback to truly make learning a two-way street.
- ❑ Meet them where they are – create Instagram hashtags, develop a classroom website, embrace silly Zoom backgrounds, and acknowledge the ups and downs of distance learning. As digital natives, your students will have ideas for creative collaboration using social tools. Encourage them to share those ideas and make that sharing a safe activity.