

## Welcoming Students with a Smile



Greeting each student at the door with a positive message brings benefits for both students and teacher, according to a study.

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A widely cited **2007 study** claimed that teachers greeting students at the classroom door led to a 27 percentage point increase in academic engagement. The problem? It included just three students.

Now **a new, much larger and more credible study**—comprising 203 students in 10 classrooms—validates that claim: Greeting students at the door sets a positive tone and can increase engagement and reduce disruptive behavior. Spending a few moments welcoming students promotes a sense of belonging, giving them social and emotional support that helps them feel invested in their learning.

The first few minutes of class are often the most chaotic, as students transition from busy areas such as the hallway or playground. Left unchecked, disruptions can become difficult to manage, but a proactive approach to classroom management can help students get focused and ready to learn. Rather than address disruptive behavior as it happens, proactive techniques—like greeting students at the door and modeling good behavior—reduce the occurrence of such behavior as teachers and students build a positive classroom culture together.

In the study, when teachers started class by welcoming students at the door, academic engagement increased by 20 percentage points and disruptive behavior decreased by 9 percentage points—potentially adding “an additional hour of engagement over the course of a five-hour instructional day,” according to the researchers.

Ten middle school teachers were randomly assigned by the researchers to one of two groups. The first group started class by greeting their students at the door, saying each student's name while using a nonverbal greeting such as a handshake or nod. The teachers also used **precorrective statements**—reminders of what to do at the start of class like, “Spend the next few minutes reviewing what we covered yesterday.” If a student had struggled with their behavior the previous day, the teachers often gave a positive message to encourage them to improve.

Teachers in the second group attended classroom management training sessions offered by their schools, but they weren't given any specific instructions on how to start class.

Researchers observed classrooms in the fall and spring, looking at academic engagement—how attentive students were to their teacher or classwork—and disruptive behavior, including speaking out of turn, leaving one's seat, and distracting classmates. Both measures improved in classrooms where teachers greeted their students, confirming what many teachers already know: Meeting students' emotional needs is just as important as meeting their academic needs.

“The results from this study suggest that teachers who spend time on the front end to implement strategies such as the PGD [positive greetings at the door] will eventually save more time on the back end by spending less time reacting to problem behavior and more time on instruction,” the study authors write.

## **BUILDING COMMUNITY**

Why do positive greetings work? When teachers use strategies like this, they help “establish a positive classroom climate in which students feel a sense of connection and belonging,” the study authors write. “This is particularly important considering the research demonstrating that achievement motivation is often a by-product of social belonging.” In other words, when students feel welcome in the classroom, they're more willing to put time and effort into learning.

Nonverbal interpersonal interactions, such as a friendly handshake or a thumbs-up, can help make greetings feel authentic and **build trust**—as long as students feel comfortable with physical contact.

When greeting students at your door:

- Say the student's name
- Make eye contact
- Use a friendly nonverbal greeting, such as a handshake, high five, or thumbs-up
- Give a few words of encouragement
- Ask how their day is going

## **ADDRESSING UNDERLYING CAUSES OF MISBEHAVIOR**

Disruptive behavior is contagious—if one student misbehaves, it can quickly spread to other students. And while most teachers try to respond immediately, punishment often backfires. **Research** shows that trying to fix student misbehavior may be futile because doing so can spur resistance and more misbehavior instead of compliance.

“Despite overwhelming evidence that such strategies are ineffective, many teachers rely on reactive methods for classroom behavior management,” explain the study authors.

So instead of asking, “How can I fix misbehavior?” teachers could ask, “How can I create a classroom environment that discourages misbehavior in the first place?” In many cases, low-level disruptions and disengagement have less to do with the student and more to do with factors that the teacher can control, such as teaching style and use of stimulating activities. For example, **a study** found that when teachers encouraged students to participate in classroom activities rather than lecturing to them, students were more likely to stay on task.

Another [recent study](#) provides additional insights: When teachers focused their attention on students' positive conduct and avoided rushing to correct minor disruptions, students had better behavior, and their mental health and ability to concentrate also improved.

## **BENEFITS FOR TEACHERS, TOO**

A welcoming classroom environment doesn't benefit students alone—it can improve the teacher's mental health as well. Slightly more than half of teachers—[53 percent](#)—feel stressed by student disengagement or disruptions. The consequences can be serious: A [2014 study](#) found that “teachers report classroom management to be one of the greatest concerns in their teaching, often leading to burnout, job dissatisfaction, and early exit from the profession.”

All too often, teachers spend time and energy responding to misbehavior with corrective discipline, such as telling students to stop talking or giving them a time-out. These may work in the short term, but they can damage teacher-student relationships while doing little to prevent future misbehavior. Research shows that it can be beneficial for student and teacher well-being to instead focus on creating a positive classroom environment.

**The takeaway:** Starting class by greeting your students at the door helps set a positive tone for the rest of the day, promoting their sense of belonging, boosting their academic engagement, and reducing disruptive behavior.