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# COMPANIONSHIP AND COMMUNICATION—THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL TEACHING

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**S**ixth-grader Jeff dashed into my classroom as I put away the remains of my lunch. "Mrs. V., will you play basketball on my team? We need someone tall. Pastor Glen's playing on Michael's team."

I smiled, nodded, and reached for my tennis shoes. As I tied the laces I laughed at the idea of a middle-aged woman being recruited as center against the pastor. Jogging toward the gym I wondered

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when I would grade those papers I had planned to do on my break. Yet I realized that this was important. I had to take an interest in my students' activities in order to gain their confidence and love. Such a relationship helps minimize classroom discipline problems, and sets the stage for more effective learning.

Teachers gain their students' confidence and love through companionship and communication. We can be effective only when students believe that we care for them.

Good relationships with our students are most easily established outside the classroom. That's why I look for oppor-

tunities to include students in my after-hours activities.

One fall day Justin said, "The home ec teacher will pay me a dollar a quart for all the wild blackberries I can pick."

"I know a place that's loaded," I replied. "You and Mark join me after school tomorrow and I'll show you." Not only did I have company while I picked my winter supply of berries, but I also gained much valuable information about the spiritual condition of my two friends as we visited casually.

I often invite girls to go shopping with me after school. I find their opinions helpful, and I'm able to share some of my

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**BY SANDRA VINCENT**

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values about dress and deportment on a one-to-one basis.

## Winning and Losing

Every Wednesday afternoon for the past five years I have opened the gym for a number of students. Mostly we play basketball, but sometimes we get so exhausted that we just sit on the mats and visit. This gives me a chance to talk about the importance of cooperation in all parts of life, not just in playing games. We often discuss how it feels to win or lose, and how Jesus wants us all to be winners.

One evening some sixth graders played against the seventh graders. A bad foul call put John out of the game. He angrily raised the basketball in the air, ready to slam it down to the floor. Looking in my direction, he caught my eye, lowered the ball, and gave it to the referee. I knew then that we had established a relationship that would carry him not only through a basketball game, but also into the classroom and throughout his daily life.

I love to take the students skiing. Playing tag on the slopes gets everyone laughing. We enjoy the fresh air and exercise. As we stumble into the lodge and gather around the table with cups of hot chocolate we feel free to share our joys and disappointments.

I also invite young people to work on my minifarm. Laboring with them allows me to share my expectations. They know I expect them to be thorough in all things—hoeing beans and digging potatoes as well as math, spelling, and language.

## A Writing Campaign

Companionship inspires communication. I make friends with shy students by writing them notes. I cover their papers with questions and comments in different colors of ink. Most students can't resist answering. This often leads to conversations and friendship.

Often I pick out appropriate cards and send them to the children's homes. I also stick notes in their desks after school.

## Using Humor

Humor offers a very effective means of communicating. It can help reinforce an idea or concept. By using gentle humor, teachers can show that what is truly funny hurts no one.

Troy had been especially trying. I

asked him to stay after school for a few minutes. I looked this 185-pound fifth grader in the eye. I told him I was annoyed by his chewing garlic tablets and hiding leftover milk containers to sour in the cupboards. I caught a hint of a smile on the corners of his mouth. Suddenly we both began laughing. I then grabbed him by the shirt front and tried to act tough. "Troy," I said, "if you want some attention, ask for it."

The next morning when he came into the room he headed my way. Giggling and waving his arms, he exclaimed dramatically, "I want some attention."

## *Teachers gain their students' confidence and love through companionship and communication.*

"Great!" I replied. "That's why I pulled your desk right up front. Now I won't miss a chance to give you some." He cooperated all week.

## Teachers Are Human

How do your students see you? Do you feel you always have to be solemn, authoritative, composed? Don't be afraid to show emotion. When you read to the children, cry along with them when the hero's dog dies. Children love to know that you have feelings, too.

*Admit your mistakes.* Every teacher alive has lost his or her cool, figured a math problem wrong, misspelled a word on the board, or misplaced a paper. Laugh at the problem and try again.

Every morning give your students a chance to share their experiences with one another. Be sure you share too. Tell them how you solved a problem or overcame a disappointment. They will see that teachers are human, too.

*Communicate in prayer.* I schedule time for student/teacher conferences every term so that children can tell me how they feel about the way the year is progressing. After our discussion, we pray together.

*Don't forget hugs.* The longer I teach,

the more I realize the importance of this kind of encouragement. Even older elementary boys like a well-timed hug or pat on the shoulder.

The above suggestions may make some of us uncomfortable. We fear we will lose students' respect if we enter into social relationships with them. We can solve this problem by discouraging any familiarity that would jeopardize our special role as leaders.

## Teacher's Pet?

As we join in companionship with our students, some of the youngsters will respond more than others. How can a conscientious teacher avoid the appearance of partiality?

I remember Doug, who seemed to be able to sense my thoughts and emotions. Often he'd slip out of his desk as I read an emotional part of a book and sit by me to give his support.

Doug could make me laugh at the simplest thing. One day he eloquently presented me with a broken yellow comb he had found on the playground. I graciously accepted it as my fellow teachers chuckled.

At school programs some students wave and shout at me from across the gym. They don't care what others think of this exuberant behavior!

These kinds of interactions occur naturally when teachers nurture friendships with their students. To avoid anxiety about favoritism, simply ask yourself these questions:

Am I listening with interest to all my students? Do I have the same standards and expectations for each one? Am I friendly and accessible to them all? If the answer is Yes, then the students are making the choices, not you. Remember that even though Jesus loved all His disciples, Peter, James, and John drew closer than the others. Indeed, John was known as the "one whom Jesus loved."

Teacher-student relationships outside the classroom set the tone for those inside it. They help provide a natural means of communication when difficulties arise. Through social contacts we will better understand each student's disposition and attitudes. This will help to prevent many misunderstandings and provide a climate of trust. If we gain the confidence of our students outside the classroom, we can easily teach and influence them inside the classroom. □