

# Inspiring the Hard-to-Reach Student: Strategies for a Successful Start to the new School Year

Have you ever had a student who would work harder for you than for anyone else in the school? The greatest teachers often have the ability to inspire and motivate their students to put in real effort, even in subjects they've struggled with before. Sometimes this happens naturally—often through intuition—but for many of us, it's something we must be intentional about.

The research on **positive teacher-student relationships** is clear

*“A Review of Educational Research of over 46 studies found that, **strong teacher-student relationships** were associated in both the short-term and long-term with **improvements on practically every measure schools care about**; higher student academic engagement, improved attendance, improved grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower school dropout rates.”*

**- Education Week**



Kick Off the School Year With **Relationships That Motivate**



In a world where technology and social media are rewiring our children's ability to pay attention and connect with others, the importance of creating caring relationships has never been greater. However, much has been said about the “**why**” of building relationships in the classroom, but rarely do we hear about the “**how**.” In the WhyTry approach we call “**Surrendering The One-Up Relationship**” provides a series of practical strategies to help educators make those connections that have the potential to motivate and engage even those hard-to-reach students.

# Introduction to Surrendering the One-Up Relationship + Sample Strategies

The heart of our approach is a concept we call ***Surrendering the One Up Relationship***. This is a set of easy to implement strategies and activities that help educators build authentic, caring relationships with students.



## What is “Surrendering the One-Up Relationship”?

**Surrendering the One-Up is a powerful approach for motivating even the most difficult-to-reach**

- Consistently communicating—without conditions—that every student has value and worth, regardless of successes, failures, or behavior.
- Creating greater equity in the relationship between you and the student.
- Recognizing students as the experts in their own lives.

Many students walk into class already feeling “one-down” in the power dynamic with adults. Nearly everything at school—rules, schedules, curriculum—is controlled by others. Combined with differences in age, authority, and experience, this can make students feel their opinions don’t matter.

When students see you as “one-up” and fully in control, they may feel unimportant, silenced, or powerless. The result? Lower motivation, resistance, and disconnection.

**Surrendering the One-Up doesn’t mean removing boundaries, rules, or accountability. It means:**

- Offering students voice and choice in appropriate ways.
- Showing vulnerability.
- Prioritizing their well-being as a person, not just as a learner.

When you do this, you send a clear message: I believe in you. I value your perspective. I trust you to take an active role in your own educational journey.

# Sample Surrendering the One-Up Strategies

## to Try This Year

These are just a few of the many strategies you can use to be more intentional at building authentic, trusting relationships with students. Each one is simple to do, but powerful in communicating that you value, see, and care about your students.

### 1. Two Truths and a Lie

Share two true stories about yourself and one that's not true. These can be funny, unusual, or just interesting. If possible, show a few pictures that go with your stories. Invite students to guess which one is the lie. After the guesses, reveal the answer and share a bit more about the two true stories. This activity works because it not only allows students to get to know you better, but it also opens the door for them to share stories about themselves. Over time, you can flip the activity and have students share their own "two truths and a lie" so that everyone learns more about one another.

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### 2. Music Playlist

Create a class playlist made up of songs submitted by your students. These can be upbeat songs to play during work time or music they feel has special meaning to them. If you want to go deeper, you can ask them to submit a song that represents who they are or that has influenced them in some way. This can lead to meaningful conversations about the lyrics and why the song matters to them. Playing student-selected music communicates that their voices matter and that the classroom belongs to them as much as it belongs to you.

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### 3. I'm Not Perfect

Look for opportunities to share your own mistakes with your students. This could be something small, like misplacing a paper, or something more personal, like a time you failed at something important. Talk openly about the feelings and emotions you experienced in that moment, and how you worked through them. Students often feel like they are the only ones who make mistakes or feel embarrassed — hearing you admit your own struggles helps normalize those experiences. It communicates that you're human, relatable, and safe to talk to when they mess up.

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### 4. My Business Card

Design a simple "business card" that has your name, your school email address, your room number, and a short message like, "I'm here for you" or "You matter to me." Hand these cards out to each student. It might seem small, but giving students a tangible reminder that you are available for them can be incredibly powerful. They can tuck it in a binder, keep it in a wallet, or put it in a locker — and on the days they feel unseen, it will remind them there's an adult in the building who cares.

## 5. Hallmark Moment

At some point in the semester, make it a goal to give each student a short, handwritten note recognizing something specific and positive about them. This could be a recent success, a kind thing they did for someone, or a strength you've noticed. Hand it to them privately or leave it somewhere they'll find it. Many students will hold onto these notes for years — especially those who don't often receive positive personal messages from adults in their lives. This strategy takes only a few minutes but has an impact that lasts far beyond the school year.

## 5 Ways to Start the Year with Intentional Relationship-Building

### 1. Know Every Student's Name (and Use It Often)

Greet students by name at the door. Use their names during class and in the hallway. This small act has a big impact.

### 2. The 2×10 Challenge

Spend two minutes a day for ten consecutive school days having a non-academic conversation with a student who may be harder to connect with.

### 3. Student Spotlights

Begin class by sharing something positive about a student—an accomplishment, a strength, or a unique interest. Invite them to share something they're proud of.

### 4. Notice and Comment

If you notice new shoes, a different hairstyle, or a shirt with their favorite band—say something. It shows you are paying attention and that you care.

### 5. Ask for Advice

Give students a real choice in something that matters to them—like what music to play before class, how to set up the room, or which warm-up activity to do.

## Introductory Relationship-Building Activity: Values Continuum

### Purpose

This fun, interactive activity helps students learn more about one another's interests and values. It builds rapport, fosters mutual respect, and encourages sharing of personal preferences in a low-pressure way.

### Materials

- Masking tape (to create a line on the floor)
- (Optional) PowerPoint slides or printed visuals with the topics

### Set-Up

1. Use masking tape to create a long line across the room.

2. Assign each end of the line a contrasting choice or value.
  - Example: “Vacation in the Mountains” on one end, “Vacation at the Beach” on the other.
3. Explain that students will stand anywhere along the line to show how strongly they feel toward one side or the other.

## **Instructions:**

### **1. Explain the Concept** - Tell students:

“This line represents how you feel about two options. One end is one choice, the other end is the opposite. Stand anywhere along the line based on your preference—you can be all the way at one end, in the middle, or anywhere in between.”

### **2. Example Round**

- Prompt: “would you rather go on a vacation in the mountains or a vacation at the beach?”
- One end is Mountains, the other is Beach.
- Students move to their chosen spot.

### **3. Invite Sharing**

- Ask for volunteers from different parts of the line to share their reasons.
- Important: Invite—never force—participation

### **4. Set Ground Rules**

- No talking while moving to your spot.
- Respect everyone’s choices.
- Listen actively to each speaker.

### **5. Continue with Light Topics** (Start with fun, easy questions)

- Chocolate vs. vanilla
- Dogs vs. cats
- Sports cars vs. SUVs
- Pie vs. cake
- TikTok vs. Instagram
- Action movies vs. comedies

Later, use the continuum for deeper topics tied to your subject or social-emotional learning.

## **Processing the Experience:**

After several rounds, ask:

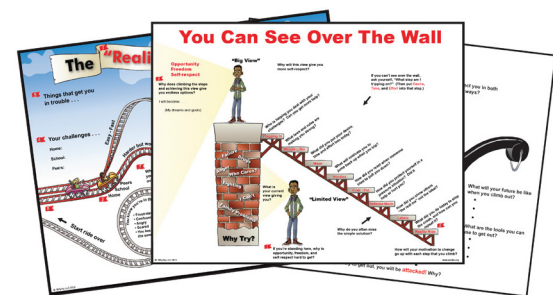
- “What’s something new you learned about someone here?”
- “Did anything surprise you?”
- “How does it feel to be with people who see things differently?”
- “How can different perspectives be a good thing?”

Want more **Surrendering the One-Up Strategies for connecting with your students?** Schedule a demo of:



## The WhyTry Program

- A flexible toolkit & prebuilt lessons for Pre K - 12th grade for teaching the **“skills of resilience”**
- Evidence based resources designed to help you engage and motivate all students
- Dynamic training to get you started and continued support to help you have successful implementation



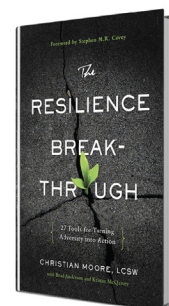
Want more strategies for **helping your staff build positive teacher/student relationships?** Schedule a demo of:

## The Transformational Leader Toolkit

- Tools for administrators to **transform their school culture**
- Prebuilt staff development workshops to build capacity in forming **positive teacher-student relationships**
- Resources to reduce staff anxiety, burn-out and **improve job satisfaction.**



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