HAPPY STUDENTS ARE MOTIVATED STUDENTS

Research has shown that the strongest predictor of happiness — more than even money or physical health — is the strength of your social connections. That’s true for adults and children.

CHRISTINA HINTON ED.M.’06, ED.D.’12, knows all too well the importance of happy students and teachers after nearly a decade partnering with schools around the world to conduct collaborative research in classrooms as founder and CEO of Research Schools International.

When she was a doctoral student at the Ed School, Hinton found in her study on happiness that for students from elementary school to high school, happiness is positively correlated with motivation and academic achievement. She also found that creating strong relationships with teachers and peers plays an important role in student happiness.

Now more than ever it is crucial to discover ways to encourage happiness and connection when so many are still apart, and Hinton says it doesn’t take that much to do. “You can do really small things and they can have a big impact on happiness.” Some of her suggestions include:

● Find the right balance of challenge. Research has shown that too little challenge can lead to boredom, but too much challenge and a person will become discouraged. “There is an optimal level of challenge where people are engaged but not overwhelmed called the Zone of Proximal Development,” says Hinton. During remote learning, setting realistic goals is important. Teachers need to remember that students aren’t going to move at the same pace as they could in the classroom, and to also adjust goals for students in unique circumstances.

● Provide social connection. All students are going to need extra emotional support this year, and it is important to make a special effort to build community. Hinton says teachers, especially those still teaching virtually, should find new ways to connect, such as offering virtual office hours or fun end-of-year virtual social events. Hinton also says to remember to practice compassion, especially with students who are disruptive. “Everyone is experiencing stress right now. You don’t know what they are facing at home. Offer compassion, understanding and support. Instead of punishments, set clear boundaries with natural consequences.”

● Help students to flourish. When students are flourishing, they are more motivated and more effective learners. Hinton says there are a number of ways to promote flourishing during in-person or remote learning, such as:

  Practice gratitude. “Research shows that low-lift strategies that promote gratitude can have a big impact on happiness,” Hinton says, like having students write down one thing they are grateful for in a Zoom chat or before an in-person class begins.

  Support others. “If you want to be happy and flourish, you should focus on supporting others,” Hinton says. Encouraging students to engage in acts of kindness in their daily lives is a good place to start, or teachers can choose a cause to work on together as a class.

  Incorporate humor. Finding something to laugh about this year might be difficult, but it’s worth it. “Research shows that laughter not only boosts well-being and happiness, but also physical health,” Hinton says.

Find New Ways to Connect

Those relationships are a critical component of motivation. As Bonawitz says that curiosity is a core drive that all human beings are born with.

“It’s a drive like hunger or thirst, and it can get us learning very rapidly,” Bonawitz says. Under particularly stressful environments, however, say like during a global pandemic, the body must balance all its needs. “Do I have time to be curious or am I worried about my next meal, or if grandma is going to get sick? If you’re under a lot of duress, you don’t have time to indulge your curiosity,” so actively finding ways to encourage curiosity in the classroom is so important.

Williamson came up with the idea for the dance party at the beginning of this unusual school year, trying to think of ways to replicate traditional classroom management techniques for online learning. Some of her more hesitant learners were hooked from the beginning. Besides the opportunity to get up and move around, it also provided students a chance to show a bit about their personalities, connect over shared interests, and extend their learning, since the songs they choose have connections to the vocabulary they are learning.

Williamson says this break in the day has also given her a unique insight into her students. In her first year at a new school, Williamson says she was initially worried about building connections with students she had never met, but she says the same theories for building community when in-person apply to remote learning.

“Our creativity in activities like the dance party motivates me to find more ways to let them express their personalities,” Williamson says. “I ask students about their lives and listen and incorporate that into my lessons. You can have deep relationships with students even online.”