



## Ten Ways to Boost Rapport with Disengaged Adolescents

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Some of these are strategies recommended to use in every interaction you have with a student (\*); some are to be used once in a while.

1. ***Listen without judgment.*** Just be present to simply express compassion for the student's suffering, even when self inflicted. Refrain from pointing out the life lesson. With good intentions, we automatically play out our teaching role, and forget that students, like adults, sometimes just need to have an adult with only a listening ear. Most kids making many mistakes get lectures not listeners in their adult interactions. When you are simply going to listen, don't focus on encouraging the student or building them up, use the time to simply listen and express compassion (head nodding, eye contact and facial expressions of compassion are all that's probably needed in the interaction).
2. ***\*Ask the student for permission to offer them advice.*** Don't assume you have the right to offer advice to every student just because you are the grown-up and assigned authority figure. When adults offer advice without asking permission first, it shows a degree of arrogance or ignorance that is off-putting to students. Even if they don't show outright disrespect, the student is not likely to take to heart or head what you have to offer. Empower your advice, and gain the student's regard, by asking the student if you may offer your perspective as wise counsel. And thank the student for the gift they gave you for being permitted to offer your advice.
3. ***Nurture the student.*** A disengaged adolescent or an adolescent who continuously fails to meet educational expectations, but who keep coming to school, is almost constantly on the receiving end of disgruntled or demanding adults who are focused on pushing the student forward. Stepping out of the space of pushing from behind and into the space of standing in front and offering a warm hand up, can have a

dramatic positive impact on students who don't expect or receive such nurturing. Simple gestures such as offering to temporarily store a student's personal belonging, offering a cup of hot chocolate, offering access to a phone, lending them something, and so forth, give these students a feeling of being taken care of. And being taken care of, touches a powerful place in the human heart, as we have all experienced at some time.

4. ***Run interference with the bureaucracy.*** When you can advocate for the student and ease their way, you are sending the unspoken message that they are worthy and personally important. The bearer of such a valuing message will have a lasting positive impact on a failing student and boost their rapport with that student.
5. ***Apologize to the student when you make a mistake.*** If you say something unintended or you are insensitive, apologize. If you don't realize your mistake until later, get up, go find the student and apologize. Let as little time pass as possible before you rectify your error. The student may display hostility or resentment, but chances are your honesty and humility will win them over in the long run, and they will behave less defensively in the future. Building trust between an adult and teen often begins with the baby step of an apology.
6. ***Recognize and acknowledge small improvements.*** Improvements are often very small (very very?) when it comes to disengaged or failing students. You have to actively look for and then notice incremental steps forward, often times ignoring setbacks, and then let the student know you noticed their positive action. Remember, you won't even recognize improvement if you focus on what they should be doing. Keep the top rung in expectation, but when they reach the bottom rung ... cheer! Remember, because they have usually created an engrained image of themselves as a failure, the disengaged student is often the *least* able to notice their own positive step toward success. This is one reason why they have such a difficult time creating momentum. You have to notice and remind them of their progress, especially in the beginning.
7. ***Do what you say you will do, when you say you'll do it.*** Every time. No exceptions. These kids expect you to let them down. If you are going to work successfully with a disengaged student, they have to know you can be trusted. Such trust is hard to earn. These students have been burned before, usually multiple of times, by other adults and by the

system. Consequently, even a small unreliability on your part can easily reinforce their belief that you are not to be trusted. To be successful with disengaged and failing students, you need their trust because you are going to be asking them to take some risky steps out of their comfort zone based simply on your request – on your “trust me.”

8. ***Look for the silver lining every time.*** When the student disappoints (and you know they will), look for the silver lining in the situation and point it out to them. They probably can't see it for themselves. Help your students fail forward by turning every setback, every disappoint, every wayward step into something useful ... the silver lining. What distinguishes survivors from those who succumb is the ability to find and focus on the positive even when the blows are brutal. Teach your students this skill of persistence.
9. ***Use please and thank you.*** By saying please and thank you, you are communicating that you are requesting not demanding. Even when your request seems small (e.g. filling out a form), it empowers your student if you show them that you understand they always have a choice to say no, to deny your request. By saying please and thank you, you are conveying gratitude about their compliance, and you are acknowledging that they are choosing to cooperate and take a positive action.