CHAPTER 4

An Evironment That Supports Academic Achievement

→ INTRODUCTION

The classroom environment greatly influences the quality and amount of learning that takes place (Scales, 1999; Wessler, 2003). Evidence has existed for some time that a supportive classroom climate not only increases student efforts and academic motivation (Johnston & Markle, 1986) but also improves achievement (Jensen, 1998; Vatterott, 1999). For middle school students, a nurturing and supportive classroom environment is essential for their emotional and social development as well as for academic success (Blum, 2005; Johnson, 1992; Scales, 1999). The critical link between attitude and academic performance is especially evident with middle school students, whose psychological and emotional states are so fragile (Mee, 1997; Strahan, 1994; Vatterott, 1999). As Alfie Kohn put it, "If you want academic excellence, you have to attend to how children feel about school and about each other" (1996, p. 103). This chapter will focus on how teachers can create the optimum environment in the classroom. **The purposes of this chapter are to help you**

- create a classroom climate where students will feel secure.
- organize your classroom to meet student needs for physical and emotional comfort.
- discover strategies that will meet student needs for power and competence.
- nurture personal relationships in your classroom.
- create a sense of community in your classroom.
- consider alternatives to punitive discipline.

Essential Questions

After reading and completing the activities in this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. Why is classroom environment so critical for successful early adolescent learning?
2. How can I structure my classroom environment to meet early adolescent needs?
3. How can I empower students to take charge of their own learning?
4. How can I nurture positive relationships among students?
5. How can I create a sense of community in my classroom?

[handwritten margin note: Good discussion questions. All students that they should begin to think about these things]

→ A NEEDS-BASED ENVIRONMENT

Creating a supportive environment for middle school students requires an awareness of and a respect for the developmental needs of early adolescents (Havinghurst, 1976; Scales, 1999; Van Hoose, Strahan & L'Esperance, 2001). As mentioned in Chapter 3, early adolescents have basic human needs for survival, love, and belonging (Daniels, 2005) that are intertwined with identity needs (needs to define oneself and to develop appropriate roles) and needs for competence and achievement (Erikson, 1963; Glasser 1986; NMSA, 2001c). Those needs are best met in a respectful, democratic environment that makes personal relationships a priority (DeVries & Zan, 2003; Wessler, 2003). A classroom environment that supports social and emotional needs also enhances academic success (Blum, 2005; Erwin, 2003; Mertens & Flowers, 2003).

Addressing Survival Needs—Creating a Safe Place to Learn

To meet student needs for survival, the classroom should make students feel safe. A safe classroom is a place where students feel secure and protected from physical danger (Patterson, 2003; Pitton, 2002). That danger could be as innocuous as a shove from another student or as foreboding as the presence of a gun or a knife. Safety is the obligation of everyone in the school—principals, teachers, counselors, secretaries, support staff, and students. Safety requires a comprehensive effort by the

entire school population working in conjunction with the community-at-large of families, churches, police, and social agencies (Belair & Freeman, 2000; Curwin & Mendler, 1997; Wolk, 2003).

A nonviolent school is created by developing the sense of a caring community with all people in the school, cultivating nonviolence as a school value and being concerned about the mental health of *everyone* in the school community, both children and adults (Curwin & Mendler, 1997; Hoffman & Levak, 2003). "A safe school is more the result of shared community values and expectations than it is the result of metal detectors or security guards" (Belair & Freeman, 2000, p. 3). Conflict resolution and other types of violence prevention programs have proven useful in some schools, but prevention-only programs have not been as effective as comprehensive programs that also address climate and relationships (Curwin & Mendler, 1997). (School climate will be discussed in Chapter 5.) The best violence prevention is a warm, nurturing environment that keeps kids close (Hoffman & Levak, 2003). A mutually respectful relationship between teachers and students will encourage students to communicate openly with teachers about their concerns (Mendler, 2001; Strahan, Smith, McElrath, & Toole, 2001). Students should also have a way to communicate anonymously to teachers or other school officials. Many schools have suggestion boxes or *bug boxes* (What's bugging you) to allow students to voice concerns. Bullying, threatening, teasing, or ridiculing of others are *not* "just part of middle school," as some people may claim (Belair & Freeman, 2000). Teachers and administrators who refuse to tolerate such behavior and make respect a priority set the parameters of a positive environment (Curwin & Mendler, 1997; Wessler, 2003).

It goes without saying that students should feel secure about their physical safety. Less obvious is the student's need for emotional safety (Inlay, 2005), to be safe from ridicule and embarrassment in the learning process and in daily interactions with peers (Pitton, 2001; Wessler, 2003). A classroom must be a comfortable place to learn, a nonthreatening environment that provides support and learning challenges (Patterson, 2003; Vatterott, 1999). Most teachers prohibit students from threatening or embarrassing others but may fail to protect students from embarrassment in the learning process (Jensen, 1998). Students who feel safe and supported are more willing to take the risk of learning (Fashola, 2005; Van Hoose et al., 2001). The tone of the classroom should be one of unanxious expectation: "I won't threaten you, but I expect much of you," of trust and fairness (Sizer, 1992). The goal is low anxiety and high standards (Barth, 1990). Removing threat from the classroom is one of the most important ways teachers can create a comfortable learning environment (Jensen, 1998; Wessler, 2003). Threats of detention, lowered grades, intimidation, embarrassment, or loss of school privileges are counterproductive to learning (Glasser, 1996; Hall & Hall, 2003). Research suggests that learning suffers when learner anxiety is high and that similar internal reactions occur for all kinds of threat—physical or psychological (Pitton, 2001). "Threats activate defense mechanisms and behaviors that are great for survival but lousy for learning" (Jensen, 1998, p. 57).

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

Reflect on your experiences as a college student. Do you remember situations in which the teacher made you feel threatened or uncomfortable? How did it affect how you felt about the class?
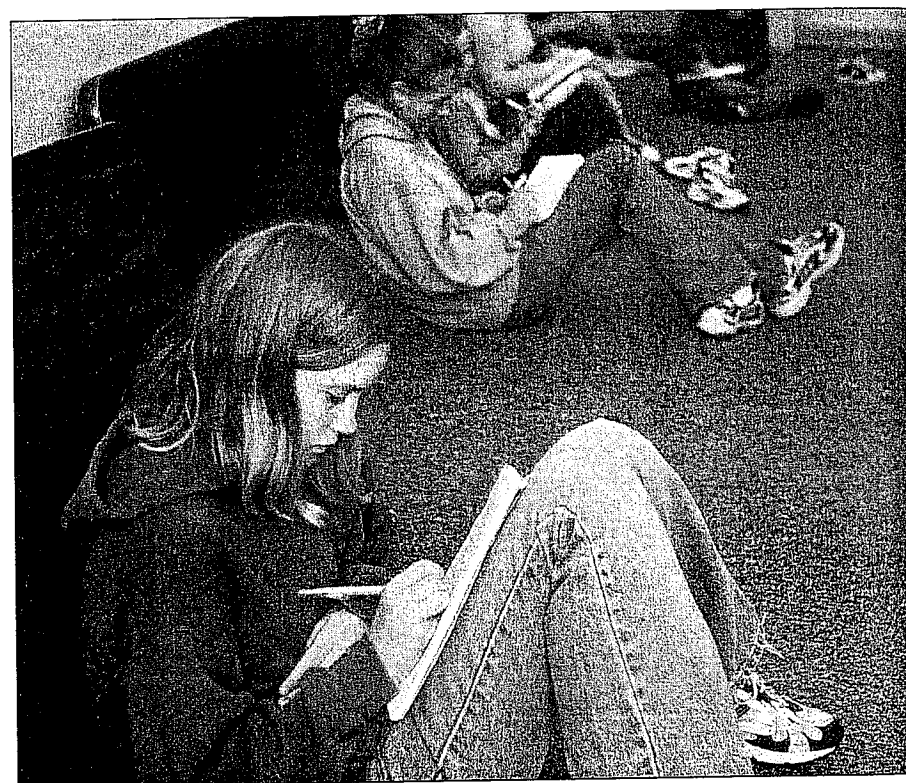
Classroom practices should respect early adolescents' physical needs.

Addressing Physical Needs—Respecting Brain Chemistry

As discussed in Chapter 2, early adolescents have a great many physical needs that affect their psychological well-being and ability to learn on any given day. Many traditional classroom practices for controlling students restrict students physically and reflect a mistrust of students to act responsibly (Kohn, 2001; Vatterott, 1999). Practices such as forcing students to sit in certain positions for long periods of time and not allowing them to use the restroom or get a drink ignore some of their most basic physical needs (Bell, 2003; Jensen, 1998, 2000). How many adults would find such rules acceptable in their own work environments?

The fact that some child might take advantage of the chance to decide when to go ? ¡ to the bathroom is no justification for requiring everyone to ask permission. If it's useful to keep track of who's out of the room, or to limit the number who are gone at any given time, children can take a pass or sign out when they feel the need. Better yet, they can be asked as a class to invent a system that addresses everyone's concerns—theirs for autonomy, the teacher's for structure or limits. (Kohn, 1996, pp. 85–86)

In addition to being inconsiderate, such practices are now physiologically indefensible, based on new knowledge about the brain (Sousa, 1998). Factors affecting the body's physical workings (such as nutrition, exercise, and sleep) influence brain chemistry, which influences the student's ability to learn (Jensen, 1998; Sprenger, 2005). Many learning problems at this age are due to brain chemistry imbalances brought about by the early adolescent's need for food, water, rest, or movement (Jensen, 2000).

The need for food is a basic physical need. Given the metabolic changes of puberty, it's possible for students to eat breakfast and still need to eat again before lunch (Kellough & Kellough, 1999). Middle schools that provide snack breaks for students have observed higher levels of concentration and fewer discipline problems (Erwin, 2003). How many adults would function at peak efficiency in their jobs without their coffee breaks or snacks at their desks each day?

In addition to food, the brain needs oxygen to work efficiently. Oxygen is necessary in order to decode and process information (Fahey, 2000; Jensen, 1998). Providing oxygen to the brain through fresh air, movement within the classroom, and regular physical education are important ways to enhance the brain's ability to learn (Jensen, 2000). Sousa (1998) has shown that after people have been sitting for long periods, the amount of blood that actually reaches their brains is reduced. After 20 minutes of sitting, blood leaves the brain and starts to pool in the seat and the feet. After standing for only 45 seconds, the amount of blood flow to the brain has increased by 15 percent (Sousa, 1998). Allowing students to stand and move every 15 to 20 minutes significantly increases blood flow to the brain and alertness. Middle school experts have long advocated daily physical education for early adolescents, and brain research confirms the wisdom of this recommendation (George & Alexander, 2003). Fresh air in the classroom and the presence of green plants also increase the amount of oxygen available to students (Erwin, 2003; Jensen, 2000).

One of the more surprising findings in the research on the brain has been the essential role of water in brain functioning (Fahey, 2000). The brain is about 78 percent water and quickly becomes dehydrated (Jensen, 1998; Sousa, 1998). For optimum functioning, the brain needs 8 to 12 glasses of water a day (Jensen, 1998). Water is necessary for electrical transmissions in the nervous system to occur; it plays an important role in supplying oxygen to the brain, and even reduces stress:

Dehydration is a common problem that's linked to poor learning. To be at their best, learners need water . . . if water is available in the learning environment, the typical hormone response to the stress (elevated levels of corticoids) is "markedly reduced or absent" (Levine & Coe, 1989). These studies suggest a strong role for water in keeping learners' stress levels in check. (Jensen, 1998, p. 26)

Many teachers have discovered that allowing students to bring water bottles to class has increased attention and on-task behavior (Fahey, 2000). Allowing students access to water can have other positive effects as well (Erwin, 2003). In one school,

> consuming water was a good break strategy for long block-scheduled classes and created a more relaxed atmosphere . . . water in the classroom eased tensions and gave students more freedom . . . active learners needed something to do with their hands and bodies during these longer classes. Water helped. Students had something to manipulate, hold onto, and put into their mouths—water bottles. (Fahey, 2000, p. 61)

In addition to food, water, and movement in the classroom, the brain also needs adequate sleep for maximum performance (Jensen, 1998, 2000; Sousa, 1998). As mentioned in Chapter 2, many early adolescents need more than eight hours of sleep, possibly as much as 10 to 12 hours during growth spurts (Wolfe, 2005). Sleep deprivation interferes with the proper functioning of neurotransmitters in the brain, making learning and emotional control more difficult (Kantrowitz & Springen, 2003; Sprenger, 2005).

These facts about the brain pertain to all brains, young and old. Given the stress of the changes of puberty, it would be logical to assume that the early adolescent body would be especially vulnerable to the physical needs of food, water, exercise, and sleep (Sprenger, 2005). Teachers must be sensitive to those needs when they structure their classroom practices (Stevenson, 2002).

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

What have you learned as a college student about your physical needs in regard to learning? What physical needs affect your ability to learn? What practices at the college level seem out of sync with your physical needs?

Addressing Needs for Power and Competence— Putting Students in Charge

Chapter 1 discussed the importance of empowering students to make decisions in the classroom. In creating the optimum classroom environment, teachers need to attend to early adolescents' need for power and competence (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Vatterott, 1999). How students feel about learning is greatly influenced by the *power* they perceive they have over the learning process (Erwin, 2003; Glasser, 1986). As they search to define themselves and their adult roles, middle school students have a strong developmental need for power (Havinghurst, 1976; Vatterott, 1999). This need is so strong that in their striving to become adults, early adolescents often engage in power struggles over inconsequential issues (Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper, 1982). Teachers often react with tighter control, when allowing students some power would more effectively meet students' needs and often eliminate power struggles (Glasser, 1986):

> The difficulty of relinquishing power, or of realizing the importance of doing so, is evident from the number of adults who spend their days ordering children around, complaining all the while that "kids just don't take responsibility for their own behavior." The truth is that if we want children to "take" responsibility, we must first "give" them responsibility, and plenty of it. (Kohn, 1996, p. 84)

In order for students to experience competence, they must be given power to make decisions directly (Eisner, 2002; Inlay, 2005). This requires a shift in the way teachers and students interact, from "doing to" power to "working with" power within the classroom (Erwin, 2003; Kohn, 2001). Every aspect of life in the classroom should cause us to reflect on what decisions might be turned over to students (DeVries & Zan, 2003; Hoffman & Levak, 2003).

The most basic empowerment gives students opportunities to self-monitor, self-evaluate, and set personal goals (Erwin, 2003; Glasser, 1986). For example, many middle school teachers require students to keep a log of assignments and grades received and to regularly average their own grades. Students are often asked to complete a self-evaluation of a project, allowing them to reflect on the quality of their work before the teacher grades it. Students often have input into which items should be included in a portfolio of their work and how those items should be judged (DeVries & Zan, 2003). (Portfolios and student self-evaluation will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 10.)

In addition to self-evaluation and personal goal setting, middle school students should be empowered in the overall process of daily classroom life (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Marzano & Marzano, 2003). They should have a voice in classroom rules, make decisions about issues that affect the group, and solve problems through regular classroom meetings (discussed later in this chapter) (DeVries & Zan, 2003; Inlay, 2005). Middle school students should be allowed to take charge of some classroom procedures, materials, and displays and should also have input into curriculum themes and methods of learning and assessments (Kohn, 2001; Marshall, 2002). Student needs of competence and achievement can also be addressed through classroom and extracurricular activities that provide opportunities for creative self-expression, self-definition, reflection, and service to community and school (Keefe & Jenkins, 2002; Scales, 1991). Curricular and instructional designs that meet student needs for competence and achievement are discussed in Chapters 6 and 7.

Love and Belonging—Developing Positive Relationships

Love and belonging could be called *ego needs*, as they so intimately affect an early adolescent's sense of self-esteem and identity. Early adolescents need unconditional love and acceptance and often go to great lengths to attain it. They also need to feel a sense of belonging, of connectedness, of membership in a group (Havinghurst, 1976; Patterson, 2003). These very strong needs are met at the middle school through personal relationships with teachers and other students and through the development of a classroom community (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Strahan et al., 2001). The success of a student's personal relationships can make the difference

between academic success and academic failure (Blum, 2005). Students' relationships with their teachers and with other students are both critical (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Scales, 1999).

The Teacher-Student Relationship

The teacher-student relationship is the most important relationship influencing academic success (Strahan et al., 2001; Vatterott, 1999). Scales (1999) found that middle schools that nurture positive relationships among students and teachers reap the benefit of more students engaged in learning and consequently, higher student achievement (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Mertens & Flowers, 2003). The significance of the teacher-student relationship is most obvious with at-risk students, where the *lack* of that connection often impedes motivation (Mendes, 2003). When students perceive that the adults and other students do not care about them, they decide not to care what these people think about them (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Vatterott, 1999). That produces a feeling of being *disconnected* from the school (Strahan, 1989). That sense of disconnectedness produces apathy (Wehlage et al., 1989) and puts students at risk for academic failure (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Wessler, 2003). The students put forth little effort to learn because effort may result in failure (Brophy, 1998). Disconnected students do not want to risk failure if they feel they have no support—much like walking a tightrope without a safety net. It's much easier not to try. This apathy results in less effort, which causes poor performance, which in turn produces a lack of teacher motivation to continue to meet student needs. This lack of teacher involvement fuels further student apathy (Mendler, 2001; Vatterott, 1991, 1999).

In spite of this link between teacher-student relationships and the level of student effort, Kohn (1991) noted that the interaction of the teacher and the student is rarely seen as integral to the process of learning. Often students most in need of a personal connection are the ones least likely to get it (Fashola, 2005). In one disturbing study, Waxman, Huang, and Padron (1995) discovered a pattern among teachers in inner-city middle schools of minimal interactions with students:

> Teachers in this study were observed spending very little time interacting with students regarding personal issues, encouraging students to succeed, showing personal regard for students, or showing interest in students' work. These are all areas that have been found to be important for developing positive learning environments where students will become successful learners. (pp. 13–14)

While many have suffered from neglect of or lack of a positive teacher-student relationship, other students experience a history of adversarial relationships that further obstructs the meeting of their needs (Fashola, 2005; Vatterott, 1999). In a survey of 2,000 middle school students, Mee (1997) discovered that many early adolescent students believe adults do not like them and do not trust them. "Students mentioned that they thought grown-ups gave them little, if any respect" (p. 40). Only about 38 percent of sixth graders and 24 percent of eighth graders feel they have a caring climate at school (Scales, 1999).

The teacher-student relationship that best supports achievement is a needs-based one (Vatterott, 1999). How does a needs-based teacher-student relationship differ from the traditional teacher-student relationship? Traditionally the teacher-student relationship has been teacher-controlled (Glasser, 1986; Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Kohn, 1996). The teacher has had all the power, has directed instruction, has initiated conversation, and has made the rules. Teachers may have had a relationship with their classes as groups but not necessarily with individual students. In a needs-based classroom, the teacher-student relationship is more democratic and personalized (see Table 4.1) (Gross, 2002; Wolk, 2003). The purpose of teaching is to engage learners, which involves forming a trusting relationship (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Patterson, 2003). Students must develop a trust in the teacher to guide them in the learning process and protect them from embarrassment (Pitton, 2001). Learning is a risky business, especially at this age when any failure is a serious blow to the ego (Fashola, 2005; Price, 2005).

A needs-based teacher-student relationship begins with absolute positive regard for all students (Hall & Hall, 2003; Mendes, 2003). All children are entitled to absolute positive regard whether they are dirty, poorly dressed, mean-spirited, ugly, or poor. An affirming teacher communicates to students his or her belief that they can be successful and are worthy of respect, that there are no "bad kids" (Wessler, 2003; Vatterott, 1999). An affirming teacher conveys the message that students with problems such as attention deficit disorder, learning disabilities, or behavioral or emotional problems are just as capable of learning as other students, given the proper conditions (Hall & Hall, 2003; Mendes, 2003; Taylor & Lorimer, 2003). At-risk students *can* be successful and the teacher's belief in that success is a critical factor in overcoming failure orientation (Hensen, 2004; Wehlage et al., 1989). Levin (in Brandt, 1992), speaking of the highly successful Accelerated Schools model, stated "the way you define children has an awful lot to do with the way you work with them" (p. 20).

Students' beliefs about themselves and their learning have a major influence on their ability to learn (Brophy, 1998; Jensen, 1998). Students must experience that teacher optimism through an individual relationship with the teacher (Fashola, 2005; Hall & Hall, 2003). If students are to feel accepted, teachers must first have regular, positive interaction with *all* students in their classroom (Strahan et al., 2001). They must take the time to gain personalized knowledge about students and communicate with them one-on-one (Patterson, 2003). Students who are different culturally or ethnically from the majority may need extra attention to feel cared about (Bell, 2003; Fashola, 2005; Wessler, 2003). Teachers must take time to learn about students' cultural backgrounds, families, and outside interests (Gay, 2004; Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Wolk, 2003). **English as Second Language (ESL) students**, students whose primary language is not English, represent a special challenge. Teachers can start by learning how to say "hello" in their students' native language and by showing they care in nonverbal ways with a smile or a touch (Brown, 2002; Frieman, 2001). Regardless of class size or the amount of time it takes, students must be made to feel that teachers care about them and know them as individuals (Erwin, 2003;

Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Wessler, 2003). The investment of time to develop personal relationships will be repaid in students' motivation, their willingness to ask for help, and their improved academic performance (Bell, 2003; Hrabowski, 2003; Rolin, 2003).

TEACHER'S VOICE

About the Teacher-Student Relationship

"You have to know your kids. That's the number one priority in a classroom. I can tell you what happens when he goes home at night, I can tell you what he likes to do on his free time, I can tell you what his interests are, I can tell you what his strengths are . . . the majority of what I'll do is I'll listen. They all have something to say, they want to talk to you. One kid, he's a White Sox fan. I'll read the sports page every morning, I'll look at the standings in the American League. I don't even like the White Sox, but I'll look just to see what they did because I'll say something to him walking in the door, 'The Sox lost last night, they looked horrible.' The kid's hooked automatically. If I say it to him once in three weeks, he knows that I know he's a White Sox fan. I know something about him and it makes him feel special in that room that day. You can do that once a month. You can pick a different kid once every two to three days, you make their world and they're excited about being in your classroom and they buy into whatever it is you're selling. . . . That's the whole job in a nutshell. You have to be able to make those connections with the kids."

Greg Bergner, seventh grade Unified Studies
Parkway Central Middle School

STUDENTS' VOICES

About the Teacher-Student Relationship

"If you and the student have a good relationship, you know, that will make them want to do the work because they want to please the teacher. But if the teacher's, like, yelling at you constantly, well, 'I don't have to do this work because he's always gonna stay mad at me.'"

Erica, eighth grade

"What do I like about Mrs. Sadler? She doesn't talk to you like a student—she talks to you like a peer."

Marco, eighth grade

The student's statement above is somewhat misleading and illustrates an interesting predicament. Middle school teachers *should* be interested in getting to know the student as a person and they should *interact* with students with the same respect they would with adults (Strahan et al., 2001). In this sense, the relationship can *look* almost like a friendship—but it is not. Teachers cannot truly be *friends* with students—after all, the role of a teacher is **in loco parentis**, acting in place of a parent. These parent-child roles are necessary to enable the teacher to be an authority figure and to make decisions that are in the child's best interest (DeVries & Zan, 2003; Mendes, 2003). Like parents, teachers must sometimes make decisions that are not popular with students. Like parents, teachers cannot be swayed in their decision making by being overly concerned that the student will no longer be their friend. In loco parentis is a role ascribed to the teacher *within the confines of the school experience* (Lemlech, 2002). For instance, inviting students to the movies or to one's home without their parents is inappropriate. It characterizes the relationship as a friendship, which it is not. That's why sexual relationships between teachers and students of any age are so egregious. If teachers are acting in place of parents, a sexual relationship between a teacher and a student violates the incest taboo. It is important for teachers to set clear boundaries with students that characterize their relationship as an adult-child relationship, not a true friendship between adults (Wormeli, 2003).

When teachers develop *individual* relationships with students, not just a relationship with students as a group, they validate the worth of all students and meet strong needs for acceptance, love, and belonging (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Wessler, 2003). Individual relationships send a message of teacher efficacy, the teacher's belief in his or her ability to influence individual student motivation and achievement (Henson, 2004; Vatterott, 1999).

A positive teacher-student relationship does not imply that children are continually praised and rewarded, but that they are given unconditional support (Hall & Hall, 2003; Mendes, 2003). Johnston (1992) calls it "pervasive caring [where people] are alert to each other's needs and take care of them without fanfare" (p. 87). A caring environment sends three messages: you are valuable, you are able, and you are responsible (Strahan, 1994).

> Warm, caring, empathic adults do several things at once. They provide the child with a benevolent, safe place in which to act. . . . I hope that few educators take seriously the absurd dictum that teachers should display no warmth until well into the school year—after firm control of the classroom has been won. Instead, teachers should establish themselves from the beginning as the students' allies, adults with whom they can work to solve the problems that emerge during the normal course of development. (Kohn, 1991, p. 503)

Students need and want relationships with their teachers (Blum, 2005; Hoffman & Levak, 2003): "Young adolescents want open communication with their teachers and want to engage in real dialogue about their learning and life in general" (Mee, 1997, p. 47). A positive teacher-student relationship creates a personal connection with students (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Vatterott, 1999). This connectedness,

or social bonding, has been shown to be an important factor in student motivation (Arhar, 1992; Inlay, 2005; Strahan et al., 2001). In fact, brain research has shown that positive social feedback from others actually increases certain chemicals in the brain that make us feel good (Jensen, 1998). Personal relationships with students send powerful messages to students about themselves (Dalton & Watson, 1997; Wessler, 2003). They affirm a student's sense of acceptance and membership and allow students to feel respected as individuals worthy of having their needs met (Blum, 2005; Inlay, 2005) (see Table 4.1).

Student-Student Relationships

Although critical to student success, even the best teacher-student relationships will not meet all the needs of middle school students. In addition to the need for personalized attention and unconditional acceptance from their teachers, early adolescents need a sense of membership, of being accepted by a group (Havinghurst, 1976; Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Patterson, 2003). After all, being accepted by a group is a validation of one's personal identity, validation that one is a "good person." Not only is social membership important to the developmental needs of early adolescents, but research also indicates the quality of social relationships at school may impact whether students come to school and what they will learn there (Scales, 1999; Vatterott, 1999).

> For at-risk students in particular, with backgrounds of school failure and lack of support of strong homes and communities outside the school, a strong sense of membership is essential to persistence in school. When identification with social institutions outside of the school is weakened, membership in school becomes critical for adolescent development into adulthood. (Arhar, 1992, p. 149)

Positive peer relationships are a critical component of a nurturing classroom (Good & Brophy, 2003; Hoffman & Levak, 2003). Early adolescents need positive

TABLE 4.1

Traditional versus Needs-Based Teacher-Student Relationships

Traditional	Needs-Based
Teacher relates to class as a group	Teacher relates to students individually
Individual personal relationships unnecessary	Individual personal relationships a priority
Teacher-to-student primary communication	True dialogue between teacher and student
Student input or opinions unimportant	Student input or opinions used for decision making
Teacher's priority is to control students	Teacher's priority is to help students

peer relationships for their social and emotional development (Havinghurst, 1976). Unfortunately, many middle school students lack the social skills necessary to form satisfying relationships with other students. Lavoie (2005) identified seven social traits of popular, well-liked children. Popular children smiled and laughed a lot, greeted others, extended invitations, held conversations, shared, and gave compliments. He observed that some learning disabled children lacked these abilities but that the abilities could be learned with coaching and practice. English as Second Language students can be taught some of these basic behaviors as well. By learning a few key phrases, greetings, and compliments in English, ESL students can begin to develop social relationships in predominantly English-speaking classrooms. It is important for teachers to keep informal social skills instruction as part of their daily routine (Marshall, 2002; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). When students are having problems in peer interactions, it is worth the time to take a few minutes to reinforce positive behaviors and to clarify your expectations about how students should treat each other (Wessler, 2003).

STUDENT'S VOICE

About Student-Student Relationships

"Keeping friends at this age is a real struggle. Everyone is going through emotional changes and a lot of good friends from elementary school are not such good friends anymore."

Leslie, eighth grade

✦ MEMBERSHIP—BRINGING DIVERSE GROUPS TOGETHER

The goals of social membership and positive peer relationships can be challenging in schools with diverse populations (Brown, 2002; Rolon, 2003). Middle school students are already a diverse group by virtue of the rate at which they experience the changes of puberty. Middle school students are diverse in many other ways, all of which affect their ability to gain acceptance from peers, interact appropriately with authority, form their identity, and feel positive about themselves (Brown, 2002; Henson, 2004). A feeling of membership, of being part of the group, thus becomes a primary need for early adolescents (Robertson & Valentine, 2002). Unfortunately, many students in middle school feel marginalized, that they are not represented in our schools or in our curriculum (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2001). If they are in the minority, they may find it difficult to buy in to the curriculum and learning—they may not feel like they are a member (Brown, 2002; Fashola, 2005; Rolon, 2003). Many types of differences can create that feeling. Helping all students to feel comfortable and accepted is an important job for middle school teachers (Erwin, 2003; Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Wessler, 2003).

Awareness and Sensitivity First

The first step for teachers in addressing diversity among students is to develop an awareness of differences and to be sensitive to them (Brown, 2002; Robertson & Valentine, 2002; Sapon-Shevin, 2003). Schools will obviously vary in the types and extent of diversity among their students. The most common ways in which students may differ are in socioeconomic status, culture, ethnicity, religion, language, sexual orientation, and disabilities.

Differences in Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status most obviously affects resources. Poorer students may not be able to dress in the latest style or to afford basic school supplies. They may not have money to purchase clothes for physical education or project supplies, to pay for field trips or to eat at McDonald's during a field trip (Payne, 2001). In all fairness, public schools should not *require* students to pay for supplies or field trips. It can be *requested* that students pay for certain instructional supplies or field trips, but teachers should be aware that some students' families will not have the money. In those cases, it is important that students not be stigmatized for their failure to pay. At the very least, teachers or the school administration should make arrangements for funding and find a discreet way to provide that funding (Frieman, 2001). When planning assignments and dealing with families, teachers should not assume that all students have access to cable television, computers, or the Internet (Mendes, 2003). Teachers should not assume that all parents are literate or English-speaking, even if their children are (Brown, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Payne, 2001). Among different social classes, family roles and responsibilities may vary along with the type of family stress. In some families, students may be responsible for babysitting or preparing meals in the evenings. In other families, students may be overscheduled in many outside activities. Teachers should be aware that not all students have extensive free time to do homework and not all students have a quiet place at home in which to do it (Vatterott, 2003).

Cultural and Ethnic Diversity ·

Cultural and ethnic diversity is becoming more the norm than the exception in many schools today (McDaniel, Necochea, Rios, Stowell & Kritzer, 2001). Sometimes there is a mismatch between the values of the school and the values of a cultural minority such as African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, or Native Americans (Ladson-Billings, 2001). For example, cultural attitudes about the value of education may vary. Some cultural minorities may associate school success with "acting white" and denying their own culture (Kunjufu, 1988; Ladson-Billings, 2001). Teachers should help students understand how they can be successful in school and still maintain their cultural identity (Hrabowski, 2003). Cultures may differ in how they value cooperation and competition (Brown, 2002; Rolon, 2003). Students who have been raised to work for the good of the group may not understand a more competitive mind-set that prohibits them from helping other students (Hodges, 1995). Within different cultures, patterns of how children interact with adult authority may vary from

A diverse group of students can work together toward common goals.

very democratic to very authoritarian. Views of external authority may vary from suspicious to deferential. For instance, children of some cultures have been taught *not* to make eye contact with an authority figure (such as a teacher) as a symbol of respect (Rasool & Curtis, 2000).

Religious Differences

Cultural or ethnic differences often include religious differences (Gay, 2004). For some students, religion may play a small part or no part at all in their lives; for others religion has a prominent place in their lives on a daily basis. Religious beliefs may influence dietary restrictions, form of dress, or whether students pray before eating lunch or taking a test. Religion may also limit a student's exposure to popular music, movies, and television, and cause parents to be concerned about which novels students read in class. Any of these can serve to make students feel different and excluded from the majority of their peers (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Rasool & Curtis, 2000).

Teachers can be sensitive to religious differences by recognizing religious holidays and rituals of different cultures (Gay, 2004). During popular holidays like Christmas, Easter, and Halloween, the history of holiday rituals can be explained as well as how different cultures celebrate (Skelton, Nigford, Harper & Reeves, 2002). Religion and religious differences should be a part of the curriculum. Ideally, instead of ignoring religion, schools should recognize that religion exists and belongs in the curriculum (Nord & Haynes, 1998). For instance, in Family and Consumer Science class, religious restrictions on diet can be discussed in conjunction with lifestyle dietary choices (such as choosing to be vegetarian or choosing a low fat diet for health

reasons). In other classes, the influence of religion on historical events, art, and music can be discussed (Bell, 2003). Teachers must be careful, however, not to endorse the practice of any particular religion (Douglass, 2002).

Language Differences §

Language differences can separate students in several ways. Students for whom English is a second language (ESL students) are perhaps the most isolated, especially recent immigrants who are adapting not only to language but also to unfamiliar culture and new environments at the same time (Frieman, 2001; Rasool & Curtis, 2000).

The most successful programs for ESL students respect the student's native language. They allow students to develop skills by learning in their native language and may alternate instruction between English and the student's first language (Gebhard, 2003). If ESL students are grouped with regular students in cooperative learning groups, ESL students can learn language through content (Brown, 2002). Other adaptations for ESL include using pictures, pocket translators, dictionaries, and translating software. Some schools assign ESL students to an extra reading class where they have additional time to learn English vocabulary and practice reading skills (Gebhard, 2003). If teachers can find ways to accept and honor ESL students, they will have developed a way of honoring all cultures in their school.

Other language differences may be more subtle, such as regional or ethnic dialects or slang. Children of poverty often lack a command of what is called the **formal register** of language. The formal register is the standard sentence syntax and word choice of work and school that uses complete sentences and specific word choice (Payne, 2001). While casual conversation uses many nonverbal assists, the formal register relies on sentence structure and syntax for meaning. The lack of familiarity with the formal register is a huge impediment to school success.

> Ability to use formal register is a hidden rule of the middle class. The inability to use it will knock one out of an interview in two or three minutes. The use of formal register, on the other hand, allows one to score well on tests and do well in school and higher education. (Payne, 2001, p. 43)

For example, African American students who speak nonstandard English can be made to feel inferior when constantly corrected or asked to restate answers in standard English (Brown, 2002; Fashola, 2005; Rolon, 2003). Asking students to speak only standard English is often perceived by students as asking them to take on another identity and to deny their culture (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Kunjufu, 1988). It is possible to respect nonstandard English much in the way we respect native language of ESL students—allow students to communicate in their preferred mode during learning, but expect formal assignments to be completed in standard English (the formal register) (Brown, 2002). Children of poverty need instruction in the formal register in order to be successful in school (Frieman, 2001). One

suggestion for writing assignments is to ask students to write the way they talk, and then work with students to translate their thoughts into formal language (Gebhard, 2003).

Each teacher must decide where he or she stands on the issue of nonstandard English. If one allows students to speak slang or nonstandard English, there will obviously need to be limits on profanity and expressions that are rude or hurtful to others. If teachers are truly uncomfortable with nonstandard English in the classroom, they should explain carefully and respectfully that they are teaching students standard English as another language, the language of business, the language in which successful people communicate in the world of work (Hrabowski, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2001).

Gay and Lesbian Students

Middle school is an especially difficult period for gay and lesbian students (Bailey & Phariss, 1996). At a time when early adolescents are discovering their sexual identity and defining an appropriate sex role, gay and lesbian children are also coming to grips with what it means to be different, wrestling with the dilemma of denying their sexuality to fit in, and contemplating how they will live in a straight world (Cloud, 2005). Passing as straight becomes an instinctive survival skill. (Someone once said that gay adolescents learn to be *chameleons*, to blend in when they need to, to change their color to the scenery) (Steinberg & Levine, 1997). To make matters worse, prejudice toward gays and lesbians still exists, even in communities that tolerate racial and ethnic differences (Bailey & Phariss, 1996). Sexual orientation is often a *covert* difference—unless students openly admit their sexual orientation, it is impossible to *know* whether they are gay or lesbian. It is possible, however, for teachers to be vigilant for harassment of students (Frieman, 2001). *Any* student may become a target of harassment because of mannerisms, dress, hairstyle, interests, or choices (such as girls choosing to play football or boys choosing to study theater or dance). Other students need to be made aware that none of these choices *proves* someone's sexual orientation, that it is common for early adolescents to experiment with a variety of roles, and that all people are entitled to respect (Steinberg & Levine, 1997). Peer acceptance must be taught and modeled (Bailey & Phariss, 1996; Sapon-Shevin, 2003).

TEACHER'S VOICE

About Sexual Harassment of Gay or Lesbian Students

"As a teacher, you have to take yourself out of the judgement area. . . . Everyone deserves to feel safe and not be made fun of. That's not a privilege—that's a right.

... I try to make them aware of their feelings—it's about empathy. ... I don't allow the word 'gay' in my classroom."

Mike Hirsch, seventh grade math
Hazelwood Junior High School

Students with Disabilities

Students with physical or mental disabilities may be mainstreamed into the regular classroom or may be assigned to special classrooms or special schools depending on the severity of their disability (Frieman, 2001; Sapon-Shevin, 2003). Many parents of children with disabilities lobby heavily to have their child included in the regular classroom because of the socializing benefit for the child. They want their child to have a normal school experience and to interact with all kinds of children. Students with disabilities often deal with issues of self-esteem and isolation (Frieman, 2001; Sapon-Shevin, 2003). Their interactions with other children help them to feel better about themselves, see beyond their disability, and improve their social skills (Ring & Reetz, 2002; Robertson & Valentine, 2002).

Students with physical and mental disabilities provide a wonderful opportunity for teachers to develop compassionate and caring behaviors in the rest of their students (Robertson & Valentine, 2002). Once students are aware of the type of assistance disabled students require, teachers are often heartened by how readily other students help and support children with disabilities (Ring & Reetz, 2002). Just as disabled children learn to define themselves as more than their disabilities, other children learn to see beyond the disabilities to connect with the disabled children on a personal level (Frieman, 2001; Robertson & Valentine, 2002).

In modifying instruction for the disabled student, the classroom teacher should consult the student's Individual Education Plan and work closely with other support personnel (Henson, 2004). Special education teachers, counselors, psychologists, physical therapists, or occupational therapists may be part of a team that works together to design appropriate physical and academic adaptations for disabled students (Ring & Reetz, 2002). Some students may require only limited adaptations, such as preferential seating, written directions for hearing impaired students or physical adaptations for students in wheelchairs. Students who are severely disabled may require a totally individualized curriculum and may even be accompanied by a full-time aide (Frieman, 2001; Ring & Reetz, 2002).

Classroom as Community

When teachers accept, honor, and celebrate diversity, they help to meet student needs for membership and they have begun the process of creating a community of learners within their classroom (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Sapon-Shevin, 2003). Barth (1990) popularized the concept of a community of learners as "a place where students and adults alike are engaged as active learners in matters of special importance to them and where everyone is thereby encouraging everyone else's learning" (p. 9). A **learning community** is a place where people work together and pool

talents and resources to reach learning goals (Barth, 1990; Erwin, 2003; Tomlinson & Doubet, 2005). In a classroom community, "teachers and students work together in a social environment to develop meaningful learning activities for all students" (Keefe & Jenkins, 2002, p. 444). Positive interactions between students are a priority and the classroom functions as a home-based peer group, providing a familylike security for students as they explore their social identity (Arhar, 1992; Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Wessler, 2003). The classroom as community is

> a place in which students feel cared about and are encouraged to care about each other. They experience a sense of being valued and respected; the children matter to one another and to the teacher. They have come to think in the plural: they feel connected to each other; they are part of an "us." (Kohn, 1996, p. 101)

How do teachers go about creating such a wonderful community in their classrooms? Three basic strategies are useful: involving students in norm setting, helping students get acquainted, and holding regular classroom meetings.

Norm Setting

Norm setting is the process by which students determine how they want their classroom to function, how people should treat each other, and how problems should be solved (DeVries & Zan, 2003; Hoffman & Levak, 2003). Norm setting goes beyond involving students in determining class rules. Rules tend to focus on what students should do and not do, but often say little about how people interact and how they treat each other (Kohn, 2001). Norm setting allows students to frame the classroom climate with values that are important to them, but it also helps them to see that values such as respect and fairness are not the arbitrary inventions of adults (DeVries & Zan, 2003; Erwin, 2003). Norm setting forces students to reflect about how personal interactions in the classroom affect their ability to learn. (Interdisciplinary teams may wish to do norm setting as a team rather than as individual classrooms.) Norm setting should be done within the first few days of class and revisited throughout the school year. Basically, norm setting is accomplished by asking students to brainstorm answers to questions like these: How do we want our classroom to be? What do we need to do so that everyone can learn? How do we want to be treated by the teacher and by other students? What values should guide our interactions? (Dalton & Watson, 1997; DeVries & Zan, 2003).

The simplest way to begin the norm setting process is to present students with a series of open-ended questions such as

"I feel comfortable in a classroom where _____"
"In this classroom I want to be able to _____"
"In order for me to learn in this classroom I need _____"
"I want other people in this classroom to _____"

A good way to start a class discussion about norms could be to ask students to think of big concepts that should be addressed. "When we think about how we want the class to be and how we want to treat each other, what big ideas should we talk about?" One group of sixth graders decided that the four areas the norms should

address were respect, helping, caring, and friendships. From there they came up with specific norms like "you should help someone if you see they need help." Suggestions for classroom norms should be discussed and agreed upon by group consensus or voting and should be posted in the classroom (Dalton & Watson, 1997; DeVries & Zan, 2003).

Most teachers have found that middle school students take the process of norm setting seriously and usually set norms similar to those the teacher would set (DeVries & Zan, 2003; Stevenson, 2002). If students would propose inappropriate norms (such as "students should be able to leave the classroom at any time they want"), a large group discussion should allow students to play out the ramifications with some teacher guidance. "Let's think about what might happen if we used that norm. What is the goal of the norm? Is there another way to achieve the same goal?" The teacher obviously maintains the right of veto, but a class discussion should clarify why. When students develop the norms themselves, their commitment to uphold them is much different from their commitment to a set a class rules the teacher could present to them (Dalton & Watson, 1997; Marshall, 2002). One student expressed what she thought would be a good norm.

STUDENT'S VOICE

About Classroom Norms

"We should all learn to live together happily helping each other."

Karen, eighth grade

Getting Acquainted

Because relationships are of such critical importance to early adolescents and because they sometimes lack social skills or confidence, structured ways of getting to know others are essential (Hoffman & Levak, 2003). Community doesn't just happen—it builds a little each day as people grow comfortable with each other (Kriete, 2003; Patterson, 2003; Wolk, 2003). Positive relationships are not only important for social development but they also affect the student's comfort level, motivation, and desire to participate in learning.

Teacher self-disclosure is the first step in getting acquainted (Mendes, 2003). Students need to know some personal information about the teacher. They need to be able to connect at some other level, to feel positive about the teacher as a person (Erwin, 2003; Wolk, 2003). Although some teachers are very private and don't want students to know personal information, they need to find a few things about themselves they can share. Students like to know whether teachers have families and children, what they like to do for recreation, or what their hobbies and interests are outside of the classroom. Self-disclosure is a way for the teacher to signal that he or she is a member of the classroom community, not just the teacher (Mendes, 2003; Scales, 1999).

One teacher writes a letter each year to introduce herself to her fifth grade students. Here are some excerpts from her letter (printed in *Among Friends*, by Dalton & Watson, 1997):

> I want to tell you about myself. I've been a teacher for 18 years and taught at Auburndale for 15 years. . . . I've been married 17 years this November and I have a 13-year-old son. He's in the eighth grade and keeps us busy with basketball and baseball. . . . I like sports, especially baseball, but I don't play any. . . . In my spare time, I enjoy cross-stitching, reading, and hiking. . . . I hate to cook, so don't be surprised to see me out in the many restaurants in our area, especially the pizza places. I know we'll have a great year, and I'm eager to learn about you in your letters!
>
> > Sincerely yours,
> > Mrs. O'Bryan

One way for teachers to get to know their students is by having them complete a survey similar to the one in Figure 4.1.

Other Getting Acquainted Strategies

Partner Interviews   Students ask their partner questions about what they want to know. (Teachers can give students scripted questions or they can make up their own.) They record the information in writing or drawing. Students check with the partner to make sure it's okay to share information. Students present their report about their partner to the class.

Talking Artifacts   Students bring in items from home that are special to them, sharing with the class something about themselves. Another way to use this technique is to have students share their artifact with a partner, complete a partner interview, and report about their partner's artifact to the class (from *Blueprints for a Collaborative Classroom*, 1997).

Scavenger Hunt   Create a scavenger hunt where students have to talk to others in the room to find a person who fits each of several categories. For instance, students

---

FIGURE 4.1

Getting to Know Your Student Survey.

Student name _____

Age ____

1. What is the hardest thing about being your age?
2. What are you most proud of about yourself? This is not something that you own (like clothes or a bike), but something about you (like a personality trait, talent, or achievement).
3. What do you worry about the most?
4. What are your favorite things to do for fun? What makes them your favorite?
5. What do you like most about school?
6. What do you wish you could learn about in school that they do not teach you?
7. What do you wish teacher knew about people your age?
8. If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?

have to find someone who is an only child, someone who has a pet, someone who plays a sport, someone who likes to cook, someone who has lived in another state, and so on.

Josette Hochman does two things to help her students get acquainted at the beginning of the year. The first test in her class (about two weeks after the start of the year) is a test of student names—students must know the names of all their classmates. The second activity is the T-shirt activity: students decorate a paper cutout in the shape of a T-shirt with information about themselves. The paper T-shirts are then hung on the wall of the classroom for everyone to read.

Jason Holmes has his students complete a timeline of their life in which they rank the highs and lows of their life. These are posted on the wall in the team area. (See Classroom Activity 4.1 for a sample timeline.) These activities not only help students learn about each other, but they also provide valuable information about students for the teacher.

C L A S S R O O M   A C T I V I T Y   4 . 1
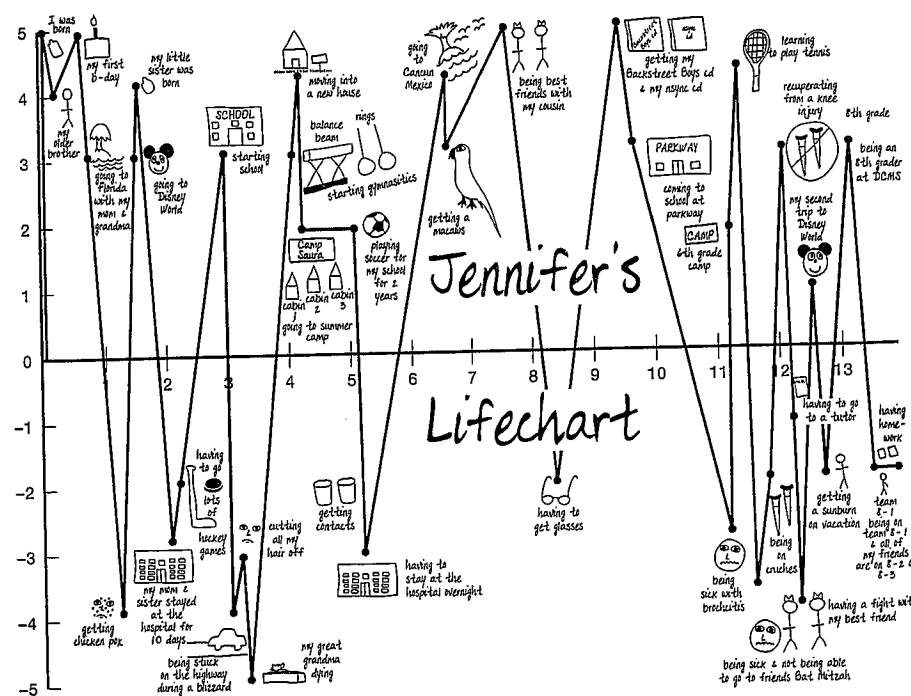
Student timeline and scoring guide Jennifer Weisman—student
Jason Holmes, eighth grade Unified Studies Parkway Central Middle School

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY 4.2

> **If I Were In Charge of The World**
> by: Eugene Jennings
>
> If I were in charge of the world
> I'd cancel <u>school,</u>
> <u>punishments,</u>
> <u>poor people,</u> and also <u>guns.</u>
>
> If I were in charge of the world
> There'd be <u>free food everywhere,</u>
> <u>everyone would be rich,</u> and <u>we wouldn't have robbers.</u>
>
> If I were in charge of the world
> You wouldn't have <u>little kids shows.</u>
> You wouldn't have <u>ugly girls.</u>
> You wouldn't have <u>chores.</u>
> Or "Don't <u>get in trouble at school.</u>"
> You wouldn't even have <u>school.</u>
>
> If I were in charge of the world
> A <u>poor person</u> would be a <u>rich person.</u>
> All <u>paper</u> would be <u>money.</u>
> And a person who sometimes forgot to <u>do chores,</u>
> And sometimes forgot to <u>feed the dogs,</u>
> Would still be allowed to be
> In charge of the world.

Eugene Jennings–student
Nicole Shoenweiss and Joda Ferguson
5/6 multiage classroom LeMasters Elementary School

Nicole Schoenweiss and Joda Ferguson gained some insight into their students' lives when they asked them to write their own version of a poem by Judith Viorst. The students first read the poem, then completed a version that had words missing. One student's poem is shown in Classroom Activity 4.2. The student's words are underlined.

REFLECTIVE QUESTION

What do you think the teachers learned about Eugene from reading his poem?

Classroom Meetings

Classroom meetings are a valuable forum for middle school students to share their concerns and opinions and work together to solve problems (Erwin, 2003; Kriete, 2003; McDaniel et al., 2001). They help students develop social competence and enhance their sense of belonging and responsibility in the classroom. Classroom meetings are *not* for the teacher to *tell* students about decisions the teacher has made (Kriete, 2003). Classroom meetings are structured so that students can have real and meaningful input in classroom activities and can work together to solve problems (Strahan et al., 2001). Students should be presented with ground rules for meetings (or generate their own ground rules) such as "no put-downs," "one person speaks at a time," "allow each other to disagree." There are generally three purposes of classroom meetings: planning and decision making, check-in meetings, and problem-solving meetings. Planning and decision-making meetings can be used for such things as planning the next unit of study, making decisions about projects, planning for a substitute teacher, or delegating classroom responsibilities (Kriete, 2003). Interdisciplinary teams may hold planning and decision-making meetings for the entire team to discuss teamwide projects such as science fairs, community service, or field trips. Check-in meetings can be used to discuss what was learned during a certain activity, how students are progressing on a project, or how the class can improve on group work. Problem-solving meetings can be used to brainstorm and solve problems related to classroom learning or social problems like getting along or being respectful to each other. Teamwide problem-solving meetings are especially helpful for problems that affect the entire team (*Ways We Want Our Class to Be*, 1996).

The classroom as community functions differently from a traditional teacher-directed classroom. In a classroom community students have input about things that affect them, they agree about the rules that will govern them, and they cooperate to reach common goals (Stevenson, 2002; Wolk, 2003). A classroom community participates in shared decision making, answering the question, "How do we want our classroom to be?" (Erwin, 2003; Kohn, 2001). A classroom community allows for student membership, ownership, and governance of the classroom (Barth, 1990; Strahan et al., 2001). In a classroom community students have a role in determining how they will learn, what they need to be able to learn, and how they will solve problems that interfere with learning (Dalton & Watson, 1997; Pitton, 2001). In a community, student-student relationships can look very different from those in a traditional classroom (see Table 4.2).

✦ THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN DISCIPLINE AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT

A caring classroom or team community not only meets early adolescents' needs for identity and membership but also has great potential as a context in which students can acquire positive moral attitudes and social skills (Kohlberg, 1984; Kohn, 2001; Mandeville & Radcliffe, 2002). According to Kolhberg's theory, the motivation to "do the right thing" is different depending on the extent of a person's moral devel-

TABLE 4.2

Student-Student Relationships: Traditional Classroom versus Classroom as Community

Traditional Classroom	Classroom as Community
Students compete against each other	Students work cooperatively for common goals
Student-student interaction discouraged	Student-student interaction encouraged
Students seek help only from teacher	Students encouraged to ask others for help before teacher
Students' physical needs unimportant	Physical needs of students respected
Threats by teacher used to control	Low anxiety/high standards
No student voice in decision making	Class meetings to establish practices and solve problems

opment. At Kohlberg's level one, children tend to do what's right to receive rewards or avoid punishment. At Kohlberg's level two, children tend to do what's right based on self-interest ("What's in it for me?"). At Kohlberg's level three, children tend to do what's right because they believe they should be a nice person and because they want the approval of the group to which they belong (DeVries & Zan, 2003; Kohlberg, 1984).

Many schools today operate at Kohlberg's level one—the predominant method of controlling students is through reward and punishment (Kohn, 2001). This is most apparent in discipline policies but also pertains to the use of grades, point systems, and honor rolls. Both traditional assessment and discipline reinforce the assumption that the only motive for a child to learn or behave is to receive a reward or to avoid punishment. But educators have learned that children are not lab rats, capable only of receiving rewards and punishments—they are complex human beings with needs for acceptance and belonging (Hall & Hall, 2003). "We cannot assume, as behaviorists did, that children are intrinsically motivated only to satisfy basic physical needs. Children are intrinsically motivated to bond with their caretakers and to fit in with their social group" (Dalton & Watson, 1997, p. 160).

Most recent classroom management programs, with the exception of Canter and Canter's Assertive Discipline (2002), focus on cooperation and community (DeVries & Zan, 2003). Discipline policies based on punishments and rewards (such as Assertive Discipline) can provide temporary compliance, but they work by operating at the primitive level of the brain (survival needs) and the lowest level of moral development (Hall & Hall, 2003). Such policies do little to enhance students' self-development or moral development and are often incompatible with early adolescents' developmental needs (Henson, 2004). (Consider the appropriateness of "silent lunches" when children have a strong need to socialize!) Schools that rely on punishment to control students treat students as if they were operating at Kohlberg's level one. It's no wonder students don't behave better. The obedience model of

discipline externalizes punishment and makes it easy for students to deny responsibility for their actions (Curwin & Mendler, 1997; Kohn, 2001). When we design discipline to be about obeying rules or pleasing adults we also set up a conflict with the student's need for independence and power and we play into an "us against them" mentality that satisfies students' desire for independence and peer acceptance at the same time (Marshall, 2002).

Adults lament that students don't behave for the good of the group, that they aren't kind, considerate or thoughtful, yet students often feel no obligation to other students because they don't feel any connection to the classroom or school community. If they have no sense of belonging to a community, no input, and no ownership in the school, there is little motivation for them to act for the benefit of the group (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Pitton, 2002). Kohlberg's level three of moral development assumes the individual is a *part* of the group—students often feel they are not. The development of a classroom community makes students full members of their own society, with opportunities for a democratic voice in ownership and governance (Inlay, 2005; Wessler, 2003). This gives students the opportunity to make moral decisions at level three and at the same time meet their needs in a positive way (DeVries & Zan, 2003; Wolk, 2003).

A classroom or team community can play a role in enhancing students' moral development (Inlay, 2005). Students striving for acceptance by their peers become motivated to do what's good for the group. At Kohlberg's level three, members of the group help to determine what is *good* through their input. This is a democratic process by which an *integration of perspectives* shapes the values and mores of the group (Kohlberg, 1984). In this way, the community allows students to meet their needs for power and peer acceptance at the same time (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Inlay, 2005). When students are empowered to participate in their own governance, discipline infractions are redefined (Wolk, 2003). Actions are wrong not because they break a rule but because they are *sins against the community* (DeVries & Zan, 2003). Therefore, consequences for infractions are not necessarily punitive, but are focused on problem solving, prevention of future problems, and restitution (Patterson, 2003). After any discipline problem, a primary goal is the repair and restoration of personal relationships (teacher-student or student-student) (Hall & Hall, 2003).

Marshall (2002) proposes one discipline model that is useful in democratic classrooms. His book *Discipline without Stress, Punishment, or Rewards* teaches students about four levels of social development: Anarchy, Bullying, Conformity, and Democracy. He defines each level in terms of how people interact in the classroom and how behaviors affect students as a group. Bullying, for example, occurs when one person believes his needs are more important than the needs of others. Bullying occurs any time a student's actions interfere with the learning of others. Marshall's system for maintaining order in the classroom teaches students to recognize the level at which they are behaving and discussing the action's impact on the group. Instead of rules and punishments, the system focuses on creating a noncoercive environment, developing personal relationships, and asking effective questions to help students self-diagnose. In Marshall's model, student choices, personal re-

flection, class meetings, and conflict resolution are valuable tools in raising student awareness of the effects their behavior has on the community.

The dilemma of building a moral community is that there will always be tension between individual interests and the good of the community. When decisions are made for the benefit of the group, individuals can't always get their way. This perspective may be difficult for some students, given a popular culture that often promises they can "have it their way" and parents that often value self-interest above the good of the group. Providing a balance between healthy self-advocacy and the good of the group is a necessity in building a democratic school community (Dalton & Watson, 1997; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003).

Needs-Based Discipline in a Caring Classroom Community

A classroom or team community that is sensitive to student needs, empowers students, and fosters positive relationships usually has few discipline problems (Hoffman & Levak, 2003). When teachers shift the focus of discipline from adult control to a goal of caring and engaged learners, they change the discipline mind set from control to help (Kohn, 2001; Stevenson, 2002; Wolk, 2003). Discipline in a caring community is respectful of student needs, always maintains student dignity, trusts the good motives of children (that they are capable of acting responsibly), and focuses on the maintenance and repair of personal relationships (Dalton & Watson, 1997; Hall & Hall, 2003).

Interdisciplinary teams often create a discipline plan for the entire team to use. How do teams or individual teachers create a discipline plan that is consistent with the concept of classroom as community? As mentioned in previous chapters, early adolescent behavior is often driven by needs, and children at this age are strongly motivated to meet their own needs (Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper, 1982). Many traditional punishments are in direct conflict with developmental needs and can actually make things *worse* (Kohn, 2001). For instance, if membership is a strong developmental need, punishing students by excluding them from class leads to feelings of rejection and further alienates students from the group. By focusing first on the developmental needs of the student as a possible *cause* of misbehavior, teachers can approach discipline from a desire to help, not a need to control (Dreikurs et al., 1982; Mendes, 2003). Needs-based discipline is the discipline mind-set most consistent with the classroom as community (Erwin, 2003; Hoffman & Levak, 2003).

Several types of needs can drive student misbehavior at this age. Ego needs such as the need for positive attention, to feel part of the group, or to avoid embarrassment are strong motivators for middle school students (Erwin, 2003). Needs for competence, control, and respect are also behind some misbehaviors. Sometimes misbehavior satisfies the simple need to have fun, escape from boredom, or feel a sense of freedom, to make one's own choices (Dreikurs et al., 1982). Inappropriate displays of anger are usually related to hurt feelings, frustration, or fear.

Needs-based discipline strategies focus on **prevention, support,** or **interventions.** Punishments are used only as a last resort. The best *prevention* strategies are to
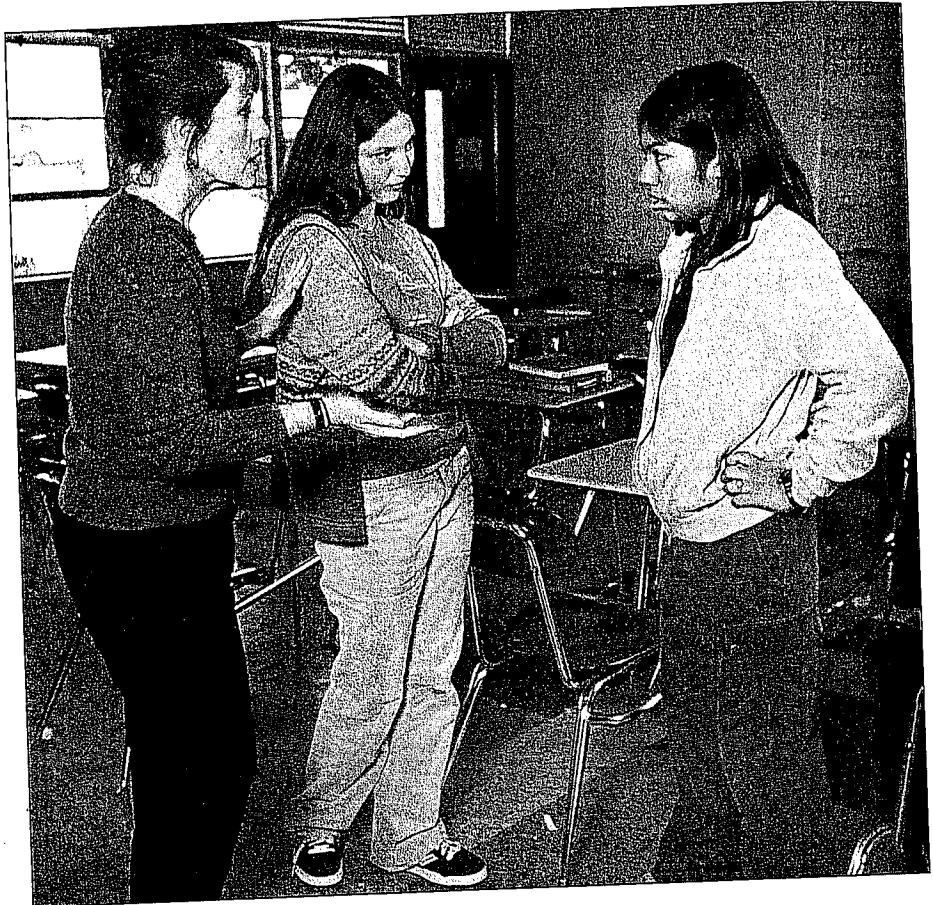
Middle school students have many social lessons to learn.

- create a noncoercive environment (Glasser, 1986; Kohn, 2001).
- make positive relationships a priority (Scales, 1999; Vatterott, 1999).
- have frequent class meetings (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; Kriete, 2003).
- give students choice in learning activities (Keefe & Jenkins, 2002; Vatterott, 1999).

TEACHER'S VOICE
About Preventing Discipline Problems

"If students are engaged and like what they're learning, they're less apt to misbehave."

Kerry Brown, eighth grade social studies
Pattonville Heights Middle School

STUDENT'S VOICE

About Preventing Discipline Problems

"I wish teachers knew how it feels to be a teenager today and that they probably went through the same things and just lighten up a little with the stupid rules."

Agostino, eighth grade

Support Strategies

Support strategies are needs-based responses that meet physical, emotional, or social needs. Support strategies seek to identify student needs that may be contributing to student misbehavior (Crone & Horner, 2003). (Special education teachers call them *positive behavioral supports*.) In investigating student problems, teachers search for possible physical, emotional, or social needs that may be precipitating the problem.

Physical Support Strategies   Remember the relationship between physical needs and brain functioning mentioned earlier in this chapter? Rather than punishing students for misbehavior or lack of focus, we need to find ways to *support* their learning by addressing their physical needs. If a student is having trouble paying attention or behaving, an important support strategy is to have the student answer the physical needs questionnaire (Figure 4.2). After learning more about students' physical habits, support strategies may include allowing students to drink water or have a snack before class, allowing them to work in different physical positions, working

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FIGURE 4.2

Physical Needs Questionnaire.

These questions will help us find out what may be getting in the way of your learning in this class. Please answer the following questions as completely as possible.
1. How long before this class do you have anything to eat? What do you usually eat at that time?
2. Estimate how many glasses of water (not other drinks) you drink on an average school day.
3. How long can you sit still before you feel like you need to move or get up?
4. What time do you normally go to bed on a school night? What time do you get up? How many hours do you sleep on the weekends?
5. Describe your favorite position to do schoolwork (sitting, standing, lying on the floor, feet up, etc.).
6. What exercise do you get on school days? When do you get that exercise?
7. During which hours in the school day is it easiest for you to concentrate? During which hours is it hardest for you to concentrate?
8. If you could create an ideal school schedule, which classes would you take in the morning and which would you take in the afternoon? Why?

with parents to increase the amount of sleep students get, or having students take a walk or run errands for exercise (Bell, 2003; NMSA, 2001c; O'Steen, Cuper, Spires, Beal & Pope, 2002). Sometimes classroom difficulties can be resolved by changing students' schedules so that their hardest classes are taken at the time of day they are most alert (Sousa, 1998; Jensen, 2000).

Emotional Support Strategies Emotional support strategies assist students in maintaining their composure and controlling emotions. This can be a difficult process given the hormonal surges and mood swings of early adolescents. Sometimes all students need is a little understanding and sympathy (Mendes, 2003).

Instead of punishing students for being unable to be in control, emotional support strategies allow students time to deal with their frustrations (Hall & Hall, 2003). Students are encouraged to initiate their own time-out or break. Students may be allowed to leave the room for a specified destination (bathroom, counselor, time-out area, other team teacher's room) when they need to regain their self-control. Sometimes students need a break from a class or a teacher for a day or two.

Some students benefit from the formal teaching and practicing of replacement behaviors (Henson, 2004). For instance, if the student is having a problem with inappropriate language, a support strategy might require the student to write down alternative things to say and to practice them with a teacher or peer. Anger workbooks are helpful in getting students to identify and understand situations that bring out their anger. Anger replacement training programs have been successful in teaching students productive ways to handle emotions in the school setting (Curwin & Mendler, 1997).

Social Support Strategies Social support strategies help students with problems in relationships with other students or with the teacher. When the problem is in getting along with the teacher, the most important concern must be the teacher-student relationship (Hall & Hall, 2003). Teacher-student relationship repair is critical (Strahan et al., 2001). When a student feels unfairly treated or that the teacher dislikes him or her, teacher and student must work together to make amends. Sometimes meeting with a trusted third party (like a counselor or another teacher) is helpful to air concerns (Marshall, 2002). Whether the teacher believes the student's feelings are justified is unimportant. Early adolescent feelings are often unjustified—what matters is how the students *perceive* the situation. Attempting to repair hurt feelings is worth the effort (Mendler, 2001). Some teachers find it easier to have students share concerns in writing first, allowing the teacher time to reflect on the issues.

In one teacher's class, a student with special needs was convinced that the teacher hated him and all other special education students. The teacher was very businesslike and had not taken the time to develop personal relationships with students. For this particular student, that lack of personal attention made him very insecure as a learner, afraid to make mistakes or ask for help. His principal suggested that the teacher and the student ask each other questions via e-mail to get to know each other better. That small amount of personal attention changed the student's perceptions.

When the problem is because the student is in trouble, Marshall (2002) suggests that the teacher ask the student two questions: "Do you know why you are in trouble? Do you think it's personal?" to start the conversation. Often the only repair that is needed is a little one-on-one time with the student (Hall & Hall, 2003; Wolk, 2003). Some teachers will ask students to have lunch with them or to help them in the classroom after school.

Helping students repair student-student relationships is a little more time consuming, but again, a necessary task for middle school teachers. When a student hurts someone in the community, it's important to repair the damage (Wessler, 2003). Some helpful techniques are third party mediation (adult or peer mediators), solving circles (when two students have to work together to resolve a problem), or allowing one student to act as an advocate for another. When student behavior has impacted more than one person, group intervention techniques, in which others talk about how the student has affected them, can be powerful. For some students, social skills instruction is helpful (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). Most counselors are familiar with such programs and can pull small groups of students out of class a few times a week to do formal activities.

Academic Support Strategies   Academic support strategies offer positive, proactive approaches to prevent student failure. The most important academic support strategy is "There's no *not* doing it!" (Wormelli, 2003). Most students who receive failing grades at the middle level receive them not because of the quality of their work, but because all work is not turned in. All work must be turned in and students must stay caught up. Some schools have academic labs to which students can be assigned to catch up on work, opportunities for after-school tutoring, or Saturday School programs, all of which send the message that we will not let the student fail by not completing work. Some teachers have students work out a *payback plan*, much like the plans credit managers establish for overspenders. Students develop a plan for how and when they will turn in missing work. If they are really overwhelmed, teachers may be wise to adapt some assignments or give alternative assignments, as they would for students with special needs. Sometimes academic support means rethinking the tasks and the workload for individual students (Hensen, 2004).

Interventions

Sometimes support strategies are inadequate to handle specific discipline problems. Interventions are appropriate when the teacher believes there must be a consequence for student behavior, but does not wish to punish the student. **Interventions** are non-punitive consequences that require students to write about, think about, or talk about their problem (Curwin & Mendler, 1997). What's the difference between a punishment and an intervention? Intention and attitude—how the intervention is explained and carried out reveals both to the student. The intent of a punishment is to hurt and the attitude is one of power over, of "I'll show you who's boss." The intent of an intervention is to allow the student to regain control, reflect on his or her actions,

repair damage, or perform retribution (Hall & Hall, 2003; Marshall, 2002). The attitude of an intervention is one of help, respect, affirmation, shaming the deed rather than the person, and forgiveness.

For instance, if a student has just had an emotional meltdown complete with temper tantrum, a punishment could be to suspend the student for the day. An intervention could be to verbalize to the student that he or she is having a very bad day and would benefit from some rest and a chance to think through what caused the tantrum. The student could be asked to reflect on the problem and to write out how he or she could have handled the situation differently. Both the punishment and the intervention would send the student home for the day, but the intervention demonstrates that the *action* rather than the student is bad, and it forces the student to think through some problem solving.

Discipline in the middle school is a learning experience. Early adolescents don't possess the social and emotional knowledge that adults have (Daniels, 2005). Discipline requires scaffolding and support just like other learning does (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). Teachers need to teach middle school students about self-control, relationships, and problem solving and shift the focus of discipline from control to relationships (Hall & Hall, 2003).

SUMMARY

A supportive classroom environment is critical to successful learning for middle school students. Early adolescents are needy—the environment of the classroom must satisfy those needs before students can concentrate on learning. The optimum environment is one in which the classroom functions as a caring community (Hoffman & Levak, 2003). A caring classroom community empowers students to take charge of their own learning, provides an emotionally safe place to learn, nurtures the personal relationships between teacher and student, and fosters positive relationships between students (Mendes, 2003; Wessler, 2003). The caring community of the classroom can assist students in their moral development and support them in their efforts to be self-disciplined.

KEY TERMS

English as Second Language (ESL)
    students
formal register
in loco parentis

interventions
learning community
norm setting
support strategies

APPLICATION ACTIVITIES

1. Compare the descriptions of traditional teacher-student relationships and needs-based relationships shown in Table 4.1. Do the descriptions of the two types of teachers remind you of teachers from your past? What specific practices or personality traits do you remember about the teachers? How did they make you feel as a learner?

2. Choose a specific cultural or ethnic minority group (such as African-Americans, ESL students, gays or lesbians) that you are interested in learning more about. Read at least two articles about that group. What specific things will you do to make those students more comfortable in your classroom?

3. Design your own set of questions or use the survey in Figure 4.1 to learn more about a group of middle school students. You may survey students in a classroom or give the survey to early adolescents that you know from your family, friends, or community.