

# The Social and Emotional Side of Academic Success

Nancy Doda, Ph.D.

## ***10 Tools for MAKING CONNECTIONS***

*For additional resources, email me at [ndoda@teacher-to-teacher.com](mailto:ndoda@teacher-to-teacher.com)*

### ***Connections/Check-Ins***

Connections is a protocol that is used to bridge the interval between what has happened at home over the weekend and what happens at school. It is a way for students to clear their minds, acknowledge personal problems, announce an achievement, or share how they are feeling or why. It can also be used to build social trust, heighten personalization and advance discussions.

### ***The Connections Protocol***

The Connections protocol can also give teachers a deeper understanding of their students and/or advisees, alerting them to problems, challenges, or triumphs in their students' lives. Therefore, it is important that every student participate. Insist that all students sit in a circle facing each other and that desks are clear.

#### **Rules:**

- This time may not be used as a study hall or SSR.
- This time is not for use as just a "gripe session"—if students have a genuine concern, ask that they share it appropriately. Sometimes people just need to get things off their chest, so you'll notice that many of these activities require that listeners not respond immediately.
- Do not allow students to sit in isolation or visit with a good friend – even paired-sharing should be an attempt to pair students who do not normally talk to one another.
- Do not allow students to listen to ipods.
- Do not allow students to leave the room for any reason.

### ***Basic Check-In Protocol***

1. All participants must sit in a circle.
2. The advisor says, "Connections is open" or gets things started by offering his/her own check-in.
3. Students take turns sharing in either a go-around, which begins with one student and then goes around the group in a clockwise formation, or popcorn-style, with students who are seated anywhere in the group speaking.
4. Follow these NORMS or better yet, create your own with the class:
  - Everyone must say something (even if it's just "good morning").
  - Speak only once until everyone has had a chance to speak.
  - Listen actively to what people have said but do not respond. This includes verbal and nonverbal communication such as nodding/shaking head,

smiling/frowning, or giving any type of reaction. “Connections” is not a time to engage in discussion.

NOTE: If any issue comes up that the group wants to respond to, the participants can decide to make time for a discussion after “Connections” is over. You can then use this time as a “teachable moment” and ask students to try to see the other side of a situation or ask the group to help problem-solve.

### ***Alternate Check-In Activities***

1. What’s Your Weather? - Each student checks-in by explaining his/her current “weather condition” (e.g., “stormy”, “cloudy”, “sunny”, “hurricane’s a brewin’”, etc.) Everyone must offer a weather condition, although they may choose not to share an explanation.
2. Four Corners - Create four possible check-in reactions (e.g., four “weather conditions”, four emotions, one – four stars); then ask each student to choose a corner and then share with everyone in that corner why they are there. One option is to have the group come back together and each person share-out one thing they heard someone else say.
3. Pair-Up - Students check-in with a partner. Since the point of this activity is to encourage students to get to know each other, you can also
  - Have students create “appointment calendars” so they are sure to pair up with everyone else at least once throughout the year. If students create an appointment calendar without specific dates, you can have them use them once a month, checking-in with several others each time.
  - Create name cards and randomly/selectively pair-up studentsNOTE: The Advisor could pair-up with a student if there is an odd number, specifically checking-in with a particularly troubled student.
4. “Dear Advisory” – Advisory begins with students being given 3x5-inch cards on which they can write a dilemma they are having, a question about a difficult situation they are in, or a problem for which they need advice. Students can write as little or as much detail as they would like, but they do not write their name on the card unless for some reason they wish to do so. The advisor collects the cards and takes a moment to look through them. The advisor should note if any themes emerge (so that he or she does not pick similar problems) and choose four or five cards to read aloud. After reading one aloud, the advisor asks the group for advice on the problem. Advisors can encourage student discussion by asking questions such as, “What do you think about \_\_\_\_\_?” or “What would you do if this was your problem?”

Some alternatives:

  - Circle-Up and Light a Candle - This is similar to “Dear Advisory” but without the anonymous factor, so it should be used with students who feel comfortable with discussing problems together. Students simply take turns sharing out problems

or frustrations; it is the job of the circle to find the “Buddhist gift” or “silver lining” or possible solutions.

- Can You Relate? - Students take turns sharing a frustration and students who can relate share a similar situation/frustration. The point of these is not to look for solutions, just “vent” and seek common ground.

### ***Added Activities for Getting to Know Each Other***

1. Human Safari – Each student writes down an interesting or unique fact about himself or herself on a piece of paper. The advisor collects and mixes them up and redistributes them so that each person gets a card (not his/her own). Then each person tries to find the person who matches the information on the card. At the end of the time allotted, each person introduces the person they found and gives an interesting fact about them. NOTE: If someone did not find their person they can share the interesting fact and that person can step forward.
2. Fact or Fiction – Each student writes down two things about themselves, one factual and one fictitious. Then each student takes a turn sharing one (they may choose to elaborate); then the others try to decide whether it is fact or fiction being shared.
3. Loaded Questions -- Pass out quarter sheets of paper. Each student will need a pencil or pen. (It works best if all students use the same type of writing utensil.) Ask a question; each student writes down an answer on a piece of paper. These are collected and one student goes through the stack, trying to match each answer to the writer. Some possible questions:
  - What 3 adjectives describe you the best?
  - What is the one thing that always makes you laugh hysterically?
  - If you were guaranteed an honest answer to any question from any person in the world, who and what would you ask?
  - What are you most proud of?
  - What song do you keep hearing over and over again?
  - What is the most annoying show on television?
  - What is the nicest feature of the person on your right?
  - What is the last movie that made your eyes tear up?
  - What one object in your home are you most embarrassed about owning?
  - What is your most annoying habit?
  - How many minutes does it take you to get ready in the morning?
  - What is one thing you always wanted as a kid but never got?
4. Speed Interview (“NASCAR Journalism”) Divide the group in half; create an inner circle and an outer circle, facing each other. In one-minute intervals, rotate the inner circle. Some possible interview questions:
  - Each person creates an interview question (without sharing it out), and then asks that question of each person he/she interviews, noting the answers. When the interview is over, each person figures out a way to summarize the “data” collected and shares it with the class. (For example, if a student decides to ask,

“What’s your favorite movie of all time?” they may report out the information by offering titles or by categorizing films into genres: “A third of this group offered horror titles and two-thirds preferred comedies.”)

- Each pair talks for the allotted time before rotating. At the end of the interview period, each student tries to write down 1 fact they learned from each interviewee. Then they can share out lists to check for accuracy.
5. Commonalities - Form small groups of 3-5. Each group will need a piece of chart paper and markers. Ask each group to list things they can observe that they may have in common; then ask each group to list things they may have in common but cannot be seen. After five to ten minutes, ask each group to select 3 – 5 favorites to share out.
- Debriefing questions:
- What cliques do we have at school?
  - Do you consider cliques good or bad?
  - How might being part of a clique be helpful or limiting to us?
  - What does it mean to stereotype?
  - How might we stereotype people?
  - What efforts can we make to learn about what people are like on the inside?
5. Venn Diagrams - Form small groups. Each group will use a piece of paper and markers to create a Venn Diagram that depicts all the things they have in common with everyone in the group and with one other and all the ways they are unique.
- Debriefing questions:
- What surprised you?
  - Did you have more in common than you thought?
  - What do you think are the reasons behind your commonalities?
  - In what ways were you unique?
  - What contributed to your uniqueness?
  - What did you learn about someone else you didn’t know previously?
6. Human Bingo – Give each student a copy of the “Human Bingo” board (see attached). Instruct students to fill in their bingo sheet by asking other participants if they have any of the things, qualities, or accomplishments on the sheet. If the answer is yes, the student signs his or her name on the bingo game sheet next to the answer. Each person may only initial one box on the bingo card. To win the game, participants must make a row in any direction. (The teacher may decide to offer a “free” box before the game begins.)
- Debriefing questions:
- What surprised you?
  - Was there any question that no one could answer?
  - What was the one thing that people most often checked off about you?
7. Circle Scramble – Each person says his/her first name so that everyone can hear it. Then, without any verbal or nonverbal communication, the group must attempt to organize into alphabetical order. Once they think they have it, each person says

his/her name to see how close they came. Go for further rounds if necessary. You can also try this with:

- Middle or last names
  - Birthdays
  - Addresses
  - Names of pets
8. High-flying Spirits – Give everyone in the group an index displaying a name associated with a theme (Batman, Robin, Batgirl, Chief O’Hara, The Joker). Participants find other people in their theme. When all groups are formed, they must create and present a cheer related to their theme. (The advisor will want to create enough themes that enable him/her to divide the advisory into small groups of 4 to 5)
  9. Ten Questions – Each participant needs pencil and paper. Instruct each advisee to complete the sentence, “I am” ten times, listing all the “roles” they fill (such as “I am a daughter”, “I am a baseball player”, “I am a driver of a red car”). Encourage the listing of roles or positions/activities, not personal characteristics/adjectives. Each participant then shares his/her list with the group.
  10. Chalk-Talk-- A Chalk Talk is a silent activity that gives participants the opportunity to brainstorm or share their thoughts about a specific question. A Chalk Talk allows students to express their feelings, emotions, and opinions about a particular topic that can then be commented on or discussed nonverbally It’s like a big virtual chat room. Chalk Talks give even quiet students an opportunity to participate and “speak.” A Chalk Talk begins with the teacher writing a question or prompt on a chalk- or white board or on a large roll of paper that has been affixed to any room wall. Students are given chalk or markers and are asked to write their thoughts, comments, or perspectives about the topic Participants can comment in writing on what another person has said, agreeing, disagreeing, or sharing a different point of view. When not writing, students should be active readers, studying and thinking about what their peers are writing and commenting on each other’s statements. At the end of a Chalk Talk, especially the first few that an advisory does together, the advisor and students should debrief the protocol verbally to reflect on both the experience of participating in a Chalk Talk and the question or prompt that they were commenting on.

**Compiled by Nancy Doda, Ph.D.**