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## Blog #6: Build Your Class Community the Week Before School Starts!

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photo from: <http://www.babysitting.academy/the-9-step-guide-to-camping-with-kids/>

Dear Class Teachers,

Have you noticed that for those students in your class who have not seen each other all summer the first day of school is much more about social interactions among peers than it is about the curriculum? The energy and excitement that surrounds coming together again can often overshadow the form and content that the teacher has planned. And what about your new students? They usually feel apprehensive and curious about their new classmates. We have the perfect solutions to mitigate the social enthusiasm and tension that often dominates the first day of school!

We found that in the lower grades (1-4) a planned swim party or picnic at a local park the day before school starts work like magic. Your students have the opportunity to reconnect, share stories, and experience the class as a whole unit in a much less demanding environment than that required of the classroom. Then on the first day they come to school having just been together the day before. This familiarity allows the focus to be on the first lesson and the year to come.

You might be asking, "Why the day before school starts?" Planning this event for the day before school, not earlier, is part of the success formula. Seldom are families still on vacation so attendance is usually close to 100% and the familiarity of being together the day before helps the students settle in the next morning.

Grades 5-8 students sometimes need more than just a swim party to reconnect. Because they are older and their relationships more complicated, a more focused, demanding activity may be required to bring them together. We found that a day spent at a ropes or challenge course is quite effective in helping them bond in a healthy way. Because it is important that every student be part of this activity, we typically did this on the second day of school or after the opening ceremonies on the first day.

Sometimes teachers of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades take steps to engender a positive, supportive relationship between their two classes from the very beginning of school. An overnight (or two) backpacking or camping trip can often help to create a more leveled 'playing field' for healthy interactions. Often just the normal activity of hiking, cooking meals, tent sharing, etc. (all done by mixed class groups) will be enough for them to find common interests with those in the other class. But we also suggest incorporating a few activities that team up 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in mixed groups to further create opportunities for cooperation (i.e. team scavenger hunts, canoeing, swim relays, charades, etc.).

What about your new students? When it comes to helping new students feel a part of the class, we suggest that you facilitate some play dates over the summer with the new student and a few classmates that you think would be a good match. We have also found that inviting the new student and one of your very outgoing sanguine students to join you in the classroom to work on some projects together (i.e. stuffing crayon bags, organizing supplies, etc.) was an easy way to support the new student become acquainted with your class through your friendly 'old' student. During this work time we recommend that the 'old' student give the new student a tour of the campus (from the student's perspective- always a very different viewpoint than that of the teacher!). It is also advisable to ask an 'old' family in the class to be the official 'mentor' to the new family. The mentor would be someone in the class who the new family can call if they have a question that isn't really in the 'teacher realm' such as: "Where do you shop for dress-code acceptable clothes for my child?"

<https://waldorfinspirations.com/blog/build-your-class-community-the-week-before-school-starts-1>