

Making Connections with Your Lunch Buddy

Whether you're new to mentoring or simply returning from a break, making connections with your young student is an ongoing process. Some students are particularly sensitive to transitions of any type for many different reasons. The following information is intended to give you tools to make meaningful connections throughout your time as a Lunch Buddy Mentor. It discusses important times for connecting with your student, such as meeting a new mentee, after summer break, after holiday breaks, and throughout the year. In addition, strategies for connecting with your lunch buddy are included.

Times for Connection

Quick Tips Box

- Keep it simple and positive
- Follow the student's lead
- Use games to ease conversation
- Be patient—connection takes time
- Show up consistently

Meeting a New Mentee

Here is a list of steps that can help set you up for a positive connection with your mentee.

-Set the tone for a positive first impression. Introduce yourself warmly

and share a little about your life.

- **Use icebreakers and conversation starters** such as *"What's your favorite part of school?"* Encourage them to share about their family, likes, and dislikes, what they enjoy outside of school, but respect their privacy if they seem uncomfortable.
- **Explain the mentoring relationship.** Let your student know there is no academic agenda. Lunch Buddy time is an opportunity to connect, have fun, and spend time together.
- **Create a safe and supportive space.** Remind them that Lunch Buddy time is a place where they can talk about school, friends, interests, or anything else that is important to them.
- **Build rapport and connection** with short games, art projects, outdoor play, shared lunch, whatever your student enjoys.
- **Be mindful of the developmental stage.** Kids are developing a sense of competence and self-control. They may be adjusting to school life or a tricky

outside dynamic, so be ready to validate their feelings and help them navigate school and outside expectations.

- **Keep interactions positive and pressure-free.** Relationship-building takes time. Focus on connection rather than expectations.

After Summer Break

As the school year begins in September, returning to your role as a Lunch Buddy is a wonderful opportunity to reestablish your connection, provide consistency, and help your student feel supported. After a summer apart, even strong relationships may need a gentle reset. Look through the way you first established your relationship (see above). Are there any areas you need to revisit?

After Holiday Breaks

Like summer breaks, you may need reconnection time with your student depending upon the length of the break and your mentee's temperament. Stay attuned to your mentee and stay positive; you may need to keep your first interaction simple.

Throughout the Year

Opportunities for connections often happen during daily interactions. Subjects, attitudes, preferences, and behaviors come up sometimes when you least expect it. Staying endlessly curious in a kind and supportive way can open doors to new understanding. Stay alert for "learning in context" opportunities.

Attunement: a process of paying attention to the young person in the moment and noticing their cues to meet them where they are. This often involves reading body language and verbal signs to understand how to move forward in the interaction.

Strategies for Connecting and Reconnecting with Your Lunch Buddy

Below are practical, age-appropriate strategies you can use to connect or reconnect with your Lunch Buddy.

Start with Warm, Low-Pressure Connection

- **Reintroduce Yourself Casually:** Even if the student remembers you, a friendly reintroduction after a break builds comfort. Example: *"I'm so happy to see you again—I've been looking forward to our lunches!"*
- **Acknowledge the Gap:** Normalize that it's been a while. Keep it light and positive.
- **Use Their Name Often:** This reinforces familiarity and belonging.

Conversation Starters That Work

Try open-ended, easy-entry questions:

- "What was something fun you did recently?"
- "What are you excited about for this school year?"
- "What's your favorite thing to do at recess now?"
- "Have you learned anything new or interesting lately?"

 **Tip:** Let the student lead the conversation when possible—follow their interests and energy level.

Incorporate Light Activities

Some students engage more easily through doing rather than talking:

- Simple games (Rock-Paper-Scissors tournaments, "Would You Rather," drawing together)
- Bring a conversation deck or prompt cards
- Create a mini "highlight" drawing or list together

Simple First Month Plan

Week 1–2: Reconnect, play simple games, share recent stories

Week 3–4: Introduce light routines (check-in questions, favorite topics)

Ongoing: Build consistency and gradually deepen conversations

Rebuild Trust and Predictability

- **Be Consistent:** Show up on time and follow through—routine builds security.
- **Review Expectations Gently:** Remind them what Lunch Buddy time is about (safe, fun, one-on-one, respectful space).
- **Respect Their Pace:** Some students may seem quieter after a break—this is normal.

Focus on Relationship First

Avoid jumping straight into goals or challenges:

- Prioritize connection before problem-solving
- Celebrate small interactions and positive moments
- Offer genuine encouragement
 - "I noticed how friendly you were to your classmate!"
 - "You worked really hard on that project."

Genuine encouragement helps students feel valued and recognized.

Be Mindful of Transitions

Back-to-school can feel overwhelming. Your presence matters:

- Validate feelings: "It can feel weird coming back after a break—you're not alone."
- Keep your tone calm and reassuring
- Watch for signs the student might need extra support and share with program staff if needed

Final Reminder

Your consistency, kindness, and attention can make a lasting difference. Even small moments of connection help students feel seen, valued, and ready for school or other life challenges. Even small moments of connection help students feel seen, valued, and supported.

Thank you for being a positive, dependable presence in a student's life. Your time and commitment make a difference.