

21 things I wish I had known as a new teacher

What I've learnt along the way



Recently, I published my seventh book, *9 Things: A back-to-basics guide to calm, common-sense, connected parenting Birth-8*. One of the main reasons I wrote the book was because I had been thinking about all the things I wish I'd known before I became a parent.

So often a parent or educator will say to me after a seminar "Oh if only I'd known that, I wouldn't have been so worried/annoyed/confused about that."

When we share the good, the bad and the ugly of our experiences — our successes and our mistakes — it can be such a valuable learning opportunity for those around us, and a great reflection for us. And when those experiences are backed up by evidence-based research, it can be invaluable for our day-to-day decision-making.

So this got me thinking about my years as a teacher and how much I learnt along the way — and how useful it would've been to have that knowledge before I first set foot in the classroom!

"I am a dedicated professional working in the art of positive 'people making' to create a world full of opportunity, abundance and peace for all."

So here are 21 things I wish I had known as a new teacher:

1. Happy, calm students learn best.

I first read this quote from Daniel Goleman in his now famous book, *Emotional Intelligence*. Goleman knew that stress was a major inhibitor to the brain's capacity to learn and store information. Teachers who consciously create calm and quiet times in their classrooms are building enormous support structures that will help children feel safe, allow them to enjoy their own thoughts, and lower the stress levels within their growing bodies. That is an environment highly conducive to learning.

2. Make friends or positive connections with the office staff.

Having allies in the hub of the school helps enormously. One lovely receptionist even invited me home to her family for a roast dinner in my first week and it made me feel so welcome and safe. The staff in the office often have their finger on the pulse of the school culture and they can be hugely helpful guides.

3. My mood matters.

I wish I had known about 'emotional contagion' and that my mood or emotional state influenced my students. It took me a while to realise this, but when I did, I discovered that by being kind, coming in with a smile and by being enthusiastic and positive, it made students come with me. Classroom culture is up to the teacher to create.

4. Playground duty is an opportunity to connect.

Use duty time as an opportunity to make connections and build relationships with students — even students you don't teach. What you put out comes back! And a huge thank you to the teachers who join students kicking a footy on the sports field, shooting hoops on the basketball courts or running yoga or dance classes for fun outside class time. What a gift for students.

5. There is no such thing as a dumb student.

Avoid making assumptions about students when you first meet them — and be careful not to hold lower expectations for some students than others based on their ability. Illiterate students can still be clever and smart and make our world a better place. ▶

6. Treat students as you want to be treated.

That means no shouting, shaming or demanding. Respectful manners have great power and also teach our students vital life skills and model positive communication to them.

7. Be passionate and proud about your vocation.

Walk tall and strive to be the best possible teacher you can be at least 80% of the time. Know there is no perfect and that often making mistakes and correcting them in front of our students can be a helpful part of life and learning.

8. Feedback is a powerful motivator when done well.

Getting assessments back as soon as possible helps students to see how they are progressing. Again, if you learn how to do the feedback sandwich so that students can accept suggestions to improve without feeling crippled emotionally or feeling negative about criticism.

9. Flexibility is important.

Be flexible and considerate with deadlines and due dates for assessments when students are under pressure or have huge school commitments like school plays, sporting carnivals or assembly commitments. Especially in adolescence, they are more likely to respond to an understanding teacher than an autocrat.

10. Laughter and lightness are important.

Learn to use novelty, lightness and laughter as a teaching strategy to help students diffuse stress and anxiety and make the positive brain chemicals of dopamine and endorphins. This will not only improve their motivation, it will make your classroom a nicer place to be for all of you.

11. Make it a priority to connect with parents.

Communicate messages about successes and concerns in a compassionate way. Emails are making this much easier to do, however a phone call or a meeting can be really valuable.

12. Look to your peers.

Find the supportive, positive staff who can and will want to help you become more —

mentoring can be so helpful at any time in your career and then as you become more experienced, you can ‘pass it on.’

13. Get involved in school happenings.

It is important to be involved with things happening at school; especially in things you enjoy. Be careful not to volunteer for too many things – and ask for help if you need it. Burnout can happen when you take on too much when teaching full time.

14. Be yourself...

“...‘cos everyone else is taken”, as they say. Strive to be authentic as students can spot ‘fake’ and they want you to be fair, consistent and competent. Work on these three aptitudes and keep striving to improve every year you teach.

15. Practise ‘kaizen’

Kaizen is a Japanese term meaning endless striving to grow and improve. Thankfully there are so many accessible opportunities to do this these days, as there are so many online courses and trainings. Every time you learn something new, know you are modelling ‘learning for life.’

16. Take some time off from being a teacher and nurture your other life.

Ensure you avoid putting your career before those you love most! Our closest relationships will always sustain us in more ways than what we do as a job, even if it is an incredibly important career.

17. A teacher needs fuel.

I wish I had known how important it is to have some high energy, quality snacks to eat quickly for those many times when I missed lunch — and how important it is to drink lots water. Helping my brain to work best with good food and water took me a while to learn.

18. Learn relaxation and stress-busting techniques.

This is especially good if you can learn techniques that you can bring into the classroom for both you and your students. Stress and anxiety negatively impact learning and behaviour.

19. Be grateful for the small things as well as the big things.

For a student to read their first book at 13 is just as worthy to celebrate as the top mark in a subject at the end of the year. Gratitude

and celebration were fabulous allies in my classroom.

20. Accept that we cannot change the lives our students live in challenging homes.

We can only make their time in our classrooms better and be sources of hope. Remember that as teachers, we often become ‘lighthouses’ for our students. It’s important for us to

21. Hold high intentions for yourself as a teacher – use upgraded language.

For example, instead of saying to someone or thinking “I’m a teacher” you might instead say: “I am a highly skilled social engineer working in the field of human potential ensuring the world becomes a better place”.

Or

“I am a dedicated professional working in the art of positive ‘people making’ to create a world full of opportunity, abundance and peace for all.”

Or

“I am privileged to work with the most sacred people on earth – children, and I make a positive difference often to allow them to become the best person they can be.”

And above all, what I wish I had known as a new teacher is summed up beautifully in this quote:

“A hundred years from now, it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove ... but that the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child.”

— Forest E. Witcraft. 

Maggie is an author, educator, and parenting and resilience specialist with a particular interest in the early years and adolescence. Her latest book is *9 Things: A back-to-basics guide to calm, common-sense connected parenting birth–8*.

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