



## Program Practices to Guide Student Behavior

**What to do:** As you read the 10 strategies in this guide, think about how each strategy might affect the behavior of students in your program. Put a checkmark by each strategy you already use. Underline at least one you're not using or want to improve. Invite a colleague to discuss how that strategy might help guide positive student behavior.

**Why it matters:** Addressing challenging student behaviors can feel overwhelming. It might seem like you're always reacting to student behavior rather than guiding or influencing it. The practices in this guide focus energy and attention (yours and students') on actions that can make a positive difference. They can also help you feel more prepared when challenges arise.

### 1. Engage students in creating group norms.

When students help develop program expectations and consequences, it gives them a sense of ownership. It also builds community and consensus around the code of conduct.

### 2. Help students define the big concepts.

Experiences and perspectives vary on concepts like justice, bullying, respect, and cooperation. Not everyone understands or defines those terms the same way. Helping students collectively define "big concepts" related to behavior is a natural part of creating group norms.

Implementing practices to guide positive behavior requires patience, consistency, and a student-centered approach that builds a community of respect for self and others.

### 3. Incorporate "blue sky" activities.

Help students imagine their role in creating a better future. Ask, "What impact can you make on the world?" Have them write down a personal goal for something they want to achieve in your program in a month, six months, or a year. Ask, "What impact do you think your participation in this program will have on you — and possibly on others?" Then have them think about how their goals connect to the impact they want to make. This exercise helps students voice their concerns and dreams, connect current actions to dreams and goals, and interact with one another on a deep and meaningful level.

### 4. Use team-building activities.

The name says it all — students work together to solve problems, accomplish tasks, or complete physical feats as they build skills like collaboration and strategic thinking. Some team-building activities incorporate movement. Turnstile, for example, is a jump rope activity that isn't as simple as it looks. In Human Knot, students work together to go from a tangled mess to an organized circle. Check online for other ideas — or challenge students to come up with their own team-building ideas!



## 5. Hold daily meetings.

Consider trying a different idea for each day of the week.

- **Emotional Check-In:** Each person says one word to describe how they're doing. This can be done by students and staff to build connections throughout the program.
- **Current Event Check-In:** Similar to an emotional check-in, this lets students voice celebrations and concerns about events in the school, community, country, or world.
- **Good News:** Students share successes or other good news with staff and peers.
- **Sticky Situations:** Particularly good for early in the year, this activity can also help with problem behaviors. Start with a "what if" like "What if you found a wallet?" or "What would you do if you noticed a classmate alone on the playground?"
- **Whip Around:** Have students finish a sentence starter. Students can opt out if they choose. Here are some examples:
  - A change I recommend for the afterschool program is . . .
  - The best part of yesterday's activity was . . .
  - Something that bothers me is . . .
- **Concept:** Focus on something students might want to learn, like setting a table, tying a tie, shaking hands, or making a friend. Provide direct instruction, demonstrations, and opportunities for practice. Encourage and honor questions.

## 6. Get to know each student as a person.

What do they care about? What are their concerns, strengths, dreams, and opportunities for growth? To strengthen connections, ask and listen. Let them get to know you, too.

## 7. Assume the best in each student.

Jumping to conclusions is never a good idea, especially when a student's behavior seems out of character. If you assume the best, will you occasionally be wrong? Maybe. But it's more likely that students will live up to your expectations. "When in doubt, assume the best" helps to build trust and respect in your program community.

## 8. Build breaks into the schedule.

By the time students walk through your door after school, they've already had a full day. They may need a change of pace and a bit of downtime. So, build transitions and breaks into your schedule. Taking breaks supports cognitive abilities such as reading comprehension and critical thinking. Also, breaks can prevent "decision fatigue" and restore motivation for long-term tasks. Consider having a safe, quiet place where individual students can safely remove themselves from an activity or situation to calm themselves, cool down from heightened emotions, or decompress if they feel overwhelmed. Establish signals, code words, or another way for students to discreetly seek and get permission to take a necessary break.



## 9. Be authentic.

You experience emotions and frustrations, too. Exhibiting an appropriate level of vulnerability (for example, acknowledging that you sometimes get frustrated or that you don't know all the answers) builds trust and connections. It's also a way to model appropriate behaviors and responses to common day-to-day challenges.

## 10. Be prepared for de-escalation.

Despite your best efforts with any of these practices, many outside factors impact students and may cause unwanted behavior. Knowing appropriate steps to take when this behavior occurs can limit its duration and impact.

- Avoid overreacting.
- Keep your body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions nonthreatening.
- Be empathetic and nonjudgmental.
- Validate the student's feelings but not their actions.
- Respect the student's personal space.
- Don't aggressively place demands on the student.
- Model appropriate emotional regulation and control.
- Communicate clearly and effectively.
- When appropriate, offer calming techniques such as deep breathing, visualization, or belly breathing.

*Never underestimate the empowering effect  
of human connection. — Drishti Bablani*

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