



Guiding Positive Student Behavior: Research and Practice Brief

This brief summarizes findings from research and practice that can help out-of-school time (OST) staff understand and respond appropriately to challenging student behavior, with a focus on issues and practices relevant to the postpandemic environment.

The Case for Rethinking Responses to Challenging Student Behavior

Corporal punishment (Robinson et al., 2005), exclusionary discipline (Nese et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2018), and verbal corrections in front of peers (Goodman & Cook, 2019) are practices that have been proven ineffective at changing student behaviors; these practices have deepened existing racial and ableist inequities (Skiba et al., 2022), lowered graduation rates, and pushed students into the judicial system (Losen & Martinez, 2013). A review of the literature (Bishop et al., 2022) determined that these inequities in discipline begin in preschool, consigning large fractions of already underserved populations to an unnecessary uphill battle, noting, “If we meet students where they are and together build an environment they want to be in, discipline becomes less of an issue, more time is devoted to the curriculum, students and teachers are engaged in deeper ways, and everyone’s well-being increases.”

See the [21st CCLC NTAC website](#) for information and resources on trauma-informed approaches in out-of-school time settings.

Trauma and Behavior Concerns

Sanders et al. (2023) note, “(A) burgeoning body of knowledge points to a significant relationship between trauma/adversity and experiencing school discipline that warrants further study and contextualizes expanded adversities, including poverty and racism as adversity. We believe this is necessary to acknowledging the hidden and unaddressed trauma among students being disproportionately disciplined, leading to a greater understanding of student lives, and evidence-based, trauma-informed, and culturally attuned discipline.” Trauma responses can negatively affect a student’s school performance by reducing the student’s tolerance for frustration as well as their flexibility and creativity in problem solving, attention, abstract reasoning, and executive functioning skills while increasing anger and noncompliance (Resler, 2017).

Dysregulation — often described as the instinct to fight, flight, or freeze — is one of the more common signs of trauma in students, and can easily escalate to a crisis without caring, constructive intervention (Center on Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports, 2022). Other potential trauma responses that may be observed are fawning (pleasing or appeasing others to avoid conflict) and flopping (collapsing or shutting down) (Heaney, 2021; Walker, 2013). Educators may not always know about the specific *setting events* (traumatic events a child experienced “before the fact”) and *triggers* (real-time environmental cues) that may influence a child’s behavior. However, understanding responses can help educators recognize possible responses that may underlie student behavior, respond appropriately, and potentially avoid or diffuse a crisis (Iovannone et al., 2017).



Unfortunately, in light of the disruptiveness of these signs of trauma, many trauma-exposed students are punitively disciplined in school (Ablon & Pollastri, 2018). Given the indisputable impact of the pandemic on exposure to adverse events (trauma) and broadly on students' mental health (Li, 2022), evidenced-based policies and practices that support student mental wellness and, by extension, positive student behavior, are critical across all education settings.

Educators should be aware that efforts to manage their own response to navigating complex circumstances around children with trauma can potentially result in secondary traumatic stress (Hydon et al., 2015). Personal steps should be taken to address signs such as fatigue or illness, cynicism, irritability, reduced productivity, feelings of hopelessness, anger, despair, sadness, nightmares, anxiety, or avoidance of people or activities (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.).

Understanding Behavior to Guide Better Outcomes

Providing educators with a contemporary lens onto the fundamentals of behavior (National Center on Intensive Intervention [NCII], n.d.) can empower them to navigate complex scenarios. Educators are encouraged to view “behavior” simply as actions or events that can be observed or measured, and to resist the natural instinct to pass judgment on those actions or events. Behavior is a form of communication, and undesired behavior from a student might serve one of four functions: attention, escape, access to tangibles, or sensory stimulation (KNILT, n.d.). Reflecting on which of these functions a child is seeking — whether consciously or subconsciously — to communicate to the adults around them is a key element to guiding them to a more positive behavior choice.

The Role of Bias in Perceiving Student Behavior

Educators can best serve their students when they reflect on their own internal, emotional response and consider the impact it has on their approach in addressing concerning behaviors. *Explicit biases* include beliefs, prejudices, and attitudes about individuals and groups and can cause us to make instant — but not necessarily accurate — judgments, and to enact preferential treatment (Daumeyer, Onyeador, Brown, & Richeson, 2019). Even more insidious, *implicit biases* that we all hold escape our awareness and require intentional work to overcome. Unconscious biases may result in the loss of opportunities to improve educational outcomes if educators come to expect less of students of a particular demographic or behavior profile” (Dee & Gershenson, 2019). Uncovering these biases can be achieved using the Implicit Association Test (Harvard Education, n.d.). This exercise supports better self-understanding, which will inform more equitable teaching strategies and practices around guiding positive student behavior (Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, 2017).

Proactively Guiding Positive Student Behavior

Proactively helping students recognize and manage their emotions is more likely to lead to positive outcomes than using punitive consequences to force the behavior you want to see. “Co-regulation” allows an adult to draw from their own measured emotions to help a student struggling with self-management (Center on Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports, 2022). Years of analysis have also revealed behavior-specific praise (BSP) to be a powerful tool in an educational setting for driving best choices among students (DeFlitch, n.d.) “BSP occurs when a



teacher observes particular student behavior and compliments the student for the appropriate response with the intent that students will continue to engage in the appropriate behavior.” (Ennis et al., 2018). The simple practice of generously timed breaks — encouraging students to move their bodies mid-activity — is a well-documented method that reduces disruptive behavior and benefits students by improving their motivation, concentration, and ability to stay on task (CDC Healthy Schools, 2022). Also, families can be an important partner in introducing positive behavior initiatives, and communicating program expectations *proactively* is shown to help guide positive behavior outcomes (Epstein et al., 2008; Garbacz et al., 2015).

Building Relationships

Developing strong OST educator-student relationships serves many critical functions throughout the lives of students. Research underscores this importance when it comes to guiding positive behavior, both proactively and reactively. A longitudinal study (Valdebenito et al., 2022) found that strong educator-student relationships were associated with reduced teacher-reported oppositional behavior fully two years after forming those bonds. Rimm-Kaufman and Sandilos (2023) cite examples of simple everyday practices educators can implement to ensure stronger relationships, including:

- Show your pleasure and enjoyment of students.
- Interact with students in a responsive and respectful manner.
- Offer students help (e.g., answering questions in timely manner, offering support that matches students' needs) in achieving academic and social objectives.
- Help students reflect on their thinking and learning skills.
- Know and demonstrate knowledge about individual students' backgrounds, interests, emotional strengths and academic levels.
- Avoid showing irritability or aggravation toward students.
- Acknowledge the importance of peers in schools by encouraging students to be caring and respectful to one another.

Restorative Practices and Restorative Justice

Restorative practices are grounded in social science and have deep roots within Indigenous community peace-making traditions. “Our current system, often responding to harm done in relationships or crimes, asks three questions: (1) What law was broken? (2) Who broke it?, and (3) What punishment is warranted? Restorative justice asks different questions, focusing on strengthening relationships between individuals and ties to one another in their communities. It asks us: Who was harmed? What are the needs and responsibilities of all affected? How do the parties together address needs and repair harm?” (Marsh, 2019).

A 2022 review of related literature found that restorative practices can improve the school climate and discipline and improves conflict management through actions designed to prevent suspensions, exclusions, conflicts, and misbehaviors; also, these practices were found to promote prosocial behaviors among students — and positive relationships among students and between students and teachers (Lodi et al, 2021).



Out-of-school time practitioners can lay the groundwork of a restorative culture by recognizing:

- The communicative nature of behaviors
- The potential role of trauma in those behaviors
- Their own biases at play in addressing behaviors
- The importance of relationship-building with and among students

The implementation of restorative practices in response to undesired behaviors can most effectively be achieved through restorative conversations, or “chats,” thus ensuring the healthiest possible conflict resolutions, and short- and long-term outcomes for youth (Schott, 2014).

Restorative Chats: When students don’t meet the norms established for the classroom or program — whether an undesired behavior is aimed at another student or a staff member — a restorative chat should be the first line of action, with commitment by the adult to come to a resolution.

Parties will follow the basic steps of:

- Transitioning to a dedicated space for calming and reflection
- Communicating the goal of resolution but honoring that it is a process
- Respectfully gaining perspective of parties using active and empathetic listening, “I” statements, and stressing the importance of accepting consequences and making amends to right wrongs after harming others
- If relevant, bringing students together for a mediated conversation, emphasizing listening and a nonconfrontational tone.

“When done correctly, these conversations bring all concerned stakeholders together to help mend relationships between students in conflict by helping them to become calm and nurture their communication skills.” (Valenzuela, 2023).

Emphasis on Skill Building

Behavioral interventions that guide students toward positive behavior typically aim to help students build skills in self-regulation and interpersonal interactions. The Inclusive Skill-Building Approach, ISLA, incorporates the above research and practices into a framework of action. The framework helps students continually progress in their positive behavior, not only by achieving satisfactory short-term resolutions, but also by reflecting on long-term skills that they can use in school and throughout their lives (Center on Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports, 2023).

A tool related to behavior that works in harmony with multitiered systems of support (MTSS) is the Taxonomy of Intervention Intensity (Fuchs et al., 2017). The taxonomy encourages educators to consider their intervention in terms of the dimensions: strength, dosage, alignment, attention to transfer, comprehensiveness, behavioral or academic support (with skill building included), and individualization.

Measuring Success

Program leaders can monitor student outcomes and use data to guide responses to students’ social, emotional and behavioral needs. (CPIS, January 2022; 21st CCLC NTAC *GPSB Monitoring Student Outcomes*). This process ensures continuous improvement of your program’s guidance of positive student behavior and, more important, informs the ultimate goals of supporting students’ development of lifelong relational skills and their own emotional health and wellness.



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