



Proactive Supports for Students With Challenging Behaviors

Ten practices that can help



Anna is a fourth grader with exceptional intellectual potential. But she's preoccupied much of the time in class, seemingly daydreaming. When not daydreaming, she's often disruptive. When she is on task, she's easily distracted by other children. She complains that the work is boring and stupid, or that someone took her paper. When her teacher reminds her of what she's supposed to be doing, Anna acts annoyed, sometimes stomping away and yelling "Leave me alone!"

Her parents report that at home Anna's only focused when watching TV or using the computer, both of which she spends a great deal of time doing. When playing with other children near her home, she often gets into arguments and physical fights.

At school, Anna was deemed ineligible for an Individual Education Plan when tested at the end of third grade. She is being considered for 504 accommodations.

Recently Anna was suspended for a day for a hair-pulling fight in the girl's bathroom, where she had gone without permission to "get even" with someone who had "stolen one of her friends." Several girls in fourth grade

report being afraid of Anna, saying she's a bully. The principal has heard from a number of parents about Anna and how she makes it hard for their children to feel safe and to learn well in school.

A Common Story in Our Schools

Children like Anna are not uncommon in our schools. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in a recent survey, ten percent of parents of children ages five through seventeen reported that their children had definite or severe difficulties with emotions, concentration, behavior, or getting along with others (Pastor, Reuben, & Loeb, 2009). And of course, bullying continues to be a serious concern in our schools nationwide.

In daily school life, we know that working with students who struggle with behavior requires a disproportionate amount of school adults' time and energy. But the extra investment in helping these children succeed is well worth the effort, because left unaddressed, their behaviors can seriously interfere with their learning as well as the learning of others.

Brian

Brian, a first grader, is another child with behavior challenges. His story is quite different from Anna's but no less common in our schools. Brian was referred for a child study evaluation in kindergarten because of his defiance of adults and physical aggression toward classmates. After the evaluation, Brian was assigned a one-on-one aide. In kindergarten, Brian spit on, hit, bit, and scratched other children and frequently had to be physically restrained by the school interventionist and once by his aide. He had six days of suspension at home that year. Now, in first grade, Brian still has to be restrained frequently when he gets angry because he kicks or punches other children without warning.

Brian's pediatrician has placed him on medication. He has a behavior plan and is rewarded when he can sustain nonaggressive, cooperative behavior for fifteen minutes. His academic performance is still at a preschool level. Other children are cautious around him and do not want to work or play with him unless an adult is present.

Brian enjoys working with his aide but is making slow progress on schoolwork and often has significant difficulty controlling his behavior when he goes to art, music, or computer class. His teacher has talked with the school psychologist to see if Brian might qualify for a self-contained resource room. She's troubled by the lack of safety the other children in the class feel and struck by how different the room feels when Brian is absent.

As for his home life, Brian moved into his grandmother's small apartment during his kindergarten year. His mother is incarcerated, and he has never known a father. He visits his mother in jail and is looking forward to her coming home next year. His grandmother works in a local restaurant as a cook and is worried about losing her job if Brian has to be suspended for any number of days this year. She goes to work early, before school starts, dropping Brian off at her sister's house on the way, but always picks him up at school at the end of the day. Brian loves his Nana and talks about her with his aide all the time.

Ten Practices for Proactively Supporting Struggling Students

As all school leaders know, there are no quick fixes for working with children such as Anna and Brian. The school discipline strategies discussed throughout this book are a crucial foundation, as important to these children as to all others. In addition, however, children who struggle need specialized supports if they and their classmates are to experience success in school. Given the large and growing number of disabilities, disorders, and syndromes typically identified in these children, understanding and identifying all these additionally needed supports is complex work that often requires the expertise of adults in many arenas, possibly including behavior specialists, doctors, and mental health care providers. Addressing this vast and important topic in its entirety is outside the scope of this book.

This chapter, however, discusses ten school practices that provide important general supports to children with challenging behaviors. These ten practices will help any child who's struggling, regardless of the child's diagnosis and what other specialized services the student needs or is receiving. You'll find recommendations for how to lead your school in implementing each practice.

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Remembering Children's Need for Safety, Challenge, and Joy

In helping struggling children improve their behavior, keep in mind children's basic need to feel safe, challenged, and joyful. Although it's important for schools to meet these needs when working on discipline with all students, it's especially critical when working with these children.

Safety

In the hierarchy of children's needs at school, safety ranks at the top. Without a sense of basic security, students' ability to think clearly, focus, and engage in normal activities can be seriously impaired.

Ensuring a climate of safety is, of course, one reason we lead efforts to build community at our schools and to establish a positive climate. Instituting the schoolwide use of morning meetings, expecting teachers to instruct their classes in peaceful conflict resolution methods, organizing community-service activities, and the like are all concrete ways to give children a sense of value and belonging and to teach them fairness, civility, and respect. We have firmly in mind the goal of helping children feel safe in school when we launch and sustain such initiatives.

In supporting children's positive behaviors and handling each instance of misbehavior, we must also keep firmly in mind the child's need for safety. This need can be especially strong in struggling children because of their often tenuous ability to manage their emotions and behaviors. For these children, a sense of security usually does not come easily, and they typically require stronger supports than others if they're to be successful.

Challenge

Often, children who struggle with behavior are not being given appropriate academic challenges. Their work is either too easy, which leads to boredom and misbehavior, or too hard, which leads to frustration and anger. When working on discipline with these students, a key is to make sure their work is appropriately challenging for them.

It's also important that we give these children social challenges that are right for them. For example, today's best practices have students doing a great deal of project-based learning with partners or in small groups. But for many children with behavior issues, working with classmates is difficult. So we need to give them extra help and move them incrementally toward independence in working with peers.

Joy

All humans want joy in their lives, and students are no different. Without joy, school feels sterile and dull, and students' learning can be greatly diminished.

Joyful schools are schools filled with excitement, laughter, and a sense of delight. They're also schools with discipline because joy is closely related to self-regulation: When children can focus their attention, control their impulses, persevere, and master skills, they feel more joyful.

For children struggling with behavior, feeling joy at school is especially important because their lives are so often filled with turmoil. In helping these children better regulate their behavior, we're helping them gain a sense of joy in their lives.

The ten practices are:

1. Support positive adult-student relationship building.
2. Ensure consistency in discipline among all staff.
3. Pay attention to transitions.
4. Give students extra supports for specials, recess, lunch, and the bus.
5. Build a schoolwide habit of observing students.
6. Give struggling students lots of positive feedback.
7. Aim for incremental progress in struggling students' work.
8. Encourage teachers to build in student reflection time.
9. Teach staff to recognize antecedents and to use de-escalation techniques.
10. Provide children with social skills instruction outside the classroom.



1. Support positive adult-student relationship-building

Positive adult-student relationships are critical to children's success. They help children feel that they belong and are known and valued, and they strengthen children's desire to work hard so they'll do well.

Admittedly, it can be hard to build relationships with struggling students. What may often be lacking between these children and school adults is what psychologists call "attunement." Attunement is key to the development of trust in a parent-child relationship. As Daniel Siegel writes in *The Mindful Brain*,

When relationships between parent and child are attuned, a child is able to feel felt by a caregiver and has a sense of stability in the present moment. During that here-and-now interaction, the child feels good, connected and loved. The child's internal world is seen with clarity by the parent, and the parent comes to resonate with the child's state. (Siegel, 2007, p. 27)

For children to have a strong, positive relationship with an adult at school, they similarly need to feel a degree of trust in the school adult. But children who struggle with behavior are not always able to trust easily. In some cases,

their home relationships may be challenging enough to have compromised their early experience of attunement. Or they're not skilled at reading their teacher's nonverbal cues (facial expression, body language, or subtle tone of voice) to sense the teacher's pleasure or concern. We often call these children "harder to read" and therefore harder to form a strong relationship with, when, in fact, they're having a harder time reading us.

But developing a strong, positive relationship with these children is nonetheless possible—and critical. It's a matter of going slower and persevering.

Our job as school leaders is to create a school culture that values deliberate relationship-building with students. Here are steps you can take:

- **Model it.** Demonstrate relationship-building in your daily interactions with students.
- **Talk about it.** Make adult-student relationship-building a topic of discussion at staff meetings and trainings.
- **Offer concrete tips.** Give staff concrete tips for building relationships with struggling students (see "Building Relationships With Students: Tips to Share With Staff" on page 78).
- **Make time for it.** Give teachers some brief, flexible times away from the activity of the classroom, especially in the early weeks of school, to chat or do a small activity with their harder-to-reach students and build the foundation for lasting trust.
- **Provide trauma information and training.** Help staff learn how to interact with students affected by trauma (see box, "Trauma Training," on page 79).

Relationship-building with students is mostly the province of classroom teachers, since children spend the bulk of their school day with these adults. But paraprofessionals and other staff need to pay attention to this work as well. So often, a student forms a special bond with a nonclassroom adult. That adult may then be a particularly helpful member of a team that provides behavior supports and interventions for the student. So focus your efforts on helping classroom adults build positive relationships with students, but don't neglect other staff.



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS: TIPS TO SHARE WITH STAFF

- **Build gradually.** Because struggling children sometimes don't have a lot of positive adult-child experiences to draw upon, they may be unusually cautious about developing new relationships. So it's important to go slow, building day by day through a variety of meaningful verbal and nonverbal interactions, including one-on-one conversations, small instructional groups, and whole-class discussions.
- **Use the child's name when addressing her.** This is the most basic way of showing warmth and interest in the child. To begin to trust an adult, the child needs to see that the adult actually knows who she is.
- **Learn the child's interests and mention them to him.** Adults should find out something about what the child likes and wants to be known for and mention what they learn in conversation. Adults might also share something about themselves with the child—some information about their pet or their weekend gardening, for example. As trust builds, the two can have one-on-one conversations to get to know each other further.
- **Maintain a quiet, firm, friendly tone when redirecting the student.** For children who've experienced trauma, a loud voice, raised in anger or not, may evoke a seemingly out-of-proportion response. When redirecting a student they don't know, adults should respectfully ask the child's name and maintain a quiet, firm, and friendly tone. For example, to a group of rowdy students in the hall, an adult might gently say, "Whoa, looks like you guys are excited to get to recess. Let's see, Brian, Jaden, Malcolm, and—I'm sorry, tell me your name. Wilson?—are you all in Mrs. Abbott's class? Who knows the hallway rules? OK, you can head out. Have fun today, Wilson."
- **Always transmit empathy and calm.** Even when—in fact, especially when—the child acts out in a forceful way, it's important to show empathy and calm. This is crucial both to the recovery of the misbehaving child and the restoration of calm and order for other students in the vicinity.

2. *Ensure consistency in discipline among all staff*

Children with behavioral challenges need clear, predictable structures. They need to know who will be teaching and supervising them on any given day, and they need to experience all these adults expecting the same behaviors from them and responding to their behavior mistakes the same way. For students with behavioral challenges, the importance of this consistency cannot be overstated.

Make sure, therefore, to provide training and practice in your school's discipline strategies to all teachers, paraprofessionals, and interventionists who work with these students. In addition, communicate at least key discipline guidelines to everyone else these children may be in contact with. This includes the school secretaries, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and custodians. Any one of these adults can make or break the child's school experience on any given day.

Begin by teaching all adults safe and de-escalating ways to talk to children with especially challenging behaviors. Explain the power that language has to either calm or escalate negative behaviors. At an absolute minimum, make it clear that the following ways of speaking will not be tolerated:

- Calling to a child from across a room or playground. (Instead, move to the child to speak to him personally.)
- Yelling at any time. (Instead, always maintain a quiet, calm, firm voice.)
- Using sarcasm, mockery, or any derogatory language with a child or a class. (Instead, tell children directly and in a neutral tone of voice what to do.)

(See Chapter 4 for more about positive adult language.)

Trauma Training

For information on working with students affected by trauma, see the following resources:

- National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children
www.starrtraining.org/tlc
- National Center for Trauma Informed Care
www.samhsa.gov/nctic
- Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators (from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network)
www.nctsnet.org
- Child Trauma Academy
www.childtrauma.org
- Massachusetts State Trauma Sensitive Schools
www.doe.mass.edu/tss
(Look for comparable initiatives in your state.)

3. Pay attention to transitions

“Safety first, last, and always” is, rightfully, a mantra in our schools. We carefully practice fire drills, lock-down procedures, evacuations, responses to weather and medical emergencies, and behavioral crisis interventions. We all know that the lives of children and adults depend on highly skilled cooperation in such emergencies.

But for some children, just about every transition in school can feel like an emergency. This can be hard to believe until we see Brian in full melt-down because he didn’t know the class was having indoor recess today, or until we hear Anna cursing loudly because no one told her it was time to change into her sneakers for PE.

Considering that the school day is six-and-a-half hours long, with several major transitions—to recess and lunch, to art and PE, to the after-school program—and many small ones such as going into a whole-class meeting or switching from group to independent work, it’s no wonder that children like Brian and Anna feel overwhelmed and that the adults teaching them feel exhausted.

Help teachers see that some modest adjustments to their practice can make transition times easier for children with high levels of anxiety—and for themselves. Here are things you can do:

- **Give teachers concrete strategies.** At right are tips for safe transitions that you can pass on to teachers.
- **Facilitate idea exchanges among teachers.** Periodically take a few minutes at staff meetings for teachers to share what worked to help their struggling students through transitions.
- **Fiercely protect time for transitions.** Build unhurried school schedules and signal clearly to teachers that they shouldn’t eat into the minutes allotted for transitions in an attempt to cover more content.



MAKING TRANSITIONS SAFE: TIPS TO SHARE WITH TEACHERS

- **Convey understanding and confidence.** Teachers should show struggling children that they understand how difficult transitions are—while also conveying confidence that the students will master transitions and that school will become more fun. And the fact is, students will improve if teachers help them. After focusing on one transition to work on with students, teachers often see carry-over as students apply their learning to other transitions.
- **Do extra modeling and practice.** In addition to using interactive modeling to teach the whole class how to navigate transitions (see Chapter 5), teachers should do additional modeling for individual students as needed.
- **Give a heads-up that a transition is coming.** It's not always easy to stay a step ahead of all transitions, but the more consistently teachers give students a couple minutes' heads-up, the more these children will be able to handle transitions without panicking.
- **Offer a calming activity to do during transitions.** Letting students listen to a short, relaxing piece of music on a headset, go with an adult for a "fresh-air" walk around the building, or do handwork (making a bracelet, beading, finger weaving) can help them stay calm during or around transitions, especially particularly bustling ones. Any small activity that's soothing and that won't distract the other students can be effective.
- **Try allowing a struggling child to help lead transitions.** "Brian, in two minutes it'll be time for the class to line up to go to music. Please give your paper to Ms. Grace. Then I'll give you the chime so you can ring it, and we can let everyone know what's coming next. Do you know what's coming next?" This not only gives the child a heads-up, but sets him up to experience success and allows the rest of the class to see him succeeding.
- **Expect incremental progress.** Teachers should target just a few school transitions for improvement, highlight the child's progress to her, and then build on that success by targeting a few more transitions.

4. Give students extra supports for specials, recess, lunch, and the bus

Some children find it extremely unsettling to be outside the classroom, removed from their classroom routines and their teacher's reassuring presence. Teachers often refer to "dropping off the children" at a special, recess, or lunch. To some children, these times can actually feel like they're being dropped off an emotional cliff.

Teachers cannot be everywhere doing everything, but help them see that they can do the following to support students through times when they won't be there.

- **Explain what they'll be doing when the class is with someone else.** This can be especially reassuring to younger students.
- **Use interactive modeling to teach expected behavior outside of the classroom.** It's best to do this modeling in the actual space—for example, model playground behaviors on the playground and bus behaviors on a bus.
- **Invite other adults to morning meetings.** Teachers can invite special area teachers, playground and cafeteria supervisors, bus supervisors, and bus drivers so the children can get to know these adults in a familiar environment.
- **Prepare children for substitute teachers.** One way is to hold a class meeting to plan everyone's responsibilities on substitute teacher days and then practice those responsibilities before the first such day.
- **Integrate special area activities with classroom learning.** Teachers can talk with the class about what they did in art, for example, and integrate those lessons into classroom work when possible. This helps time outside the classroom feel less removed from classroom life.
- **Give a transferring-in student a tour of school spaces.** Important spaces to cover are the specials classrooms, the playground, and the lunchroom.

Here's what you can do to support classroom teachers with these steps:

- **Give reminders.** Talk about how important it is to give struggling students extra support for outside-the-classroom time. Give teachers quick reminders at meetings and through notes or staff bulletins.
- **Provide lists of outside-the-classroom behaviors to teach.** See Chapters 12–15 for sample lists for the playground, cafeteria, hallways, and buses. Consider creating lists for other common spaces in the school. You can ask staff to suggest additions to these lists.
- **Do some of the teaching yourself.** For example, at the beginning of the year, take classes of children to a particularly challenging place in your school—perhaps the playground or the bus loading area—and introduce that space to the group before teachers start modeling specific behaviors. This deliberate, slow introduction can be especially reassuring for struggling students.
- **Coordinate a morning meeting visitation schedule.** Be ready to adjust the school schedule on some days to allow for these visitations.

5. Build a schoolwide habit of observing students

Observation is a powerful tool for teaching and for understanding the complex behaviors of children with challenges. It's important that specialists observe and conduct Functional Behavioral Assessments of children. It's equally important that classroom teachers develop the habit and skills of everyday observation. Help teachers see that frequently stepping back for a moment to watch a student like Brian, for example, can allow them to detect patterns such as what tends to trigger his anger, which is critical for helping him get through the day calmly and productively.

To enable teachers to frequently stop and observe, be sure to:

- **Arrange coverage.** A teacher assistant or you yourself can supervise a class for awhile to free the teacher to step back and observe.
- **Reassure teachers that observations require only a few minutes.** Even ten minutes of observation on three consecutive days, for example, can be tremendously helpful when a teacher is first getting to know the child.

CHIP REFLECTS

“After-Teaching”

Once when I was observing in a fifth grade classroom, I noticed the teacher saying quietly to a student, “Walter, move away from Alex and get back to your own work.” The teacher then turned her back to help another student with a math problem and next moved to another student who needed help.

Just then, a commotion arose on the other side of the room. The teacher looked up to see Walter and Alex laughing, clearly off-task. The teacher walked over to Walter and said calmly, “Walter, take a break.” Walter responded, “What the hell did I do?” at which point the teacher went to the classroom phone and called for the interventionist to come and escort the child from the room.

The teacher’s response to Walter’s outburst was not inappropriate—it followed the school’s discipline protocol. However, a simple strategy that I call “after-teaching” could have prevented the outburst and the need for Walter to leave the room.

After the teacher told him to move away from Alex, Walter, like so many children who lack self-control, was, for a moment, waiting for the teacher’s control—waiting to see if she would follow through, whether she meant what she had said.

If the teacher had used this after-teaching moment, she would have turned around to look at Walter once she got to the next student, smiled at Walter, perhaps gestured to reinforce the verbal redirection she’d given him, and waited to see him move to his seat. Only then would she have returned her focus to that next student. Walter would have gotten the message that his teacher’s redirection was for real, that she really cared whether he did what she told him to do.

For children with a good deal of self-control, such deliberate after-teaching may not be necessary. These children tend to get, from our initial redirection, that we expect them to do what we said.

Not so for struggling children. With these students, we need to pause long enough to see that they’re following through on our teaching. It’s as important

for principals, lunch and recess staff, and other school adults to do this as it is for classroom teachers. This simple act can turn a child toward expected behavior early on, before a small misbehavior becomes a big one. Then, when the student does what we told them to, we close the learning loop by offering a brief word or a small signal that lets them know we saw, which reinforces the desired behavior.

Will children like Walter sometimes be unresponsive to our after-teaching strategies and require further intervention anyway? Of course.

Does after-teaching significantly decrease the likelihood of this? Does it improve self-control? Does it strengthen the teacher-student relationship? In my experience, yes, yes, and yes.

6. Give struggling students lots of positive feedback

Children who struggle with behavior can never get too much positive reinforcement. As Paula Denton states in her book *The Power of Our Words: Teacher Language That Helps Children Learn*, language “molds our sense of who we are; helps us understand how we think, work, and play; and influences the nature of our relationships” (Denton, 2007, p. 3).

As a school leader, you can influence all staff—especially teachers, with whom children spend the most time—in giving much-needed positive reinforcement to struggling students by frequently reminding them to do so and, importantly, by modeling it yourself.

In guiding staff in this work, emphasize the following:

- **Remember the power of reinforcing language.** Reinforcing positives is so important because it lets students know what they’re doing well so they can build on it. (See page 52 of Chapter 4 for to-do’s of reinforcing language to pass on to staff.)
- **Mix in nonverbal signals.** Feedback doesn’t always have to be verbal. In fact, often, children with challenging behaviors are already overwhelmed by the amount of talk coming their way. A thumbs-up, a bright smile, a wink, or a nod of the head are all messages of affirmation that enable the child to see himself as capable, likeable, and valued.

- **Write children notes.** Children love getting notes from adults. A sticky note on an assignment (“You spelled ‘receive’ right every time on this paper!”), a folded note on their desk in the morning (“Come see me this morning. I have a surprise for you.”), or a note tucked inside a library book (“I found this book about arachnids and checked it out for you.”) can do wonders for a child’s attitude toward school, especially on a bumpy day.
- **Let classmates see struggling children in a positive light.** During the first few weeks of school, teachers can invite two or three children a day to share something they’re “good at.” Children who may be accustomed to being noticed only for what they’re doing wrong might then tell about being skillful skateboarders, or demonstrate whistling, or share a snack recipe they created. Suggest to teachers that they might dedicate a bulletin board or special shelf to display artifacts of children’s strengths.

7. Aim for incremental progress in struggling students’ work

Children with behavior issues often have mental discipline or organizational challenges that prevent them from easily absorbing the same quantity or complexity of instruction as their classmates. Such students do best when we chunk up their work and expect them to make progress a little at a time.

Guide teachers on how to do this. Share the following strategies, illustrated by the example of learning to write a friendly letter in third grade:

- **Adjust expectations.** While the majority of the class is expected to practice writing for twenty minutes, the struggling child might be assigned to write one sentence and then show it to the teacher before continuing.
- **Set incremental goals.** On day one, the child is expected to identify whom to write to and think of just one thing to say to that person, with the teacher writing the sentences for him. On a subsequent day, the teacher helps the student think of another thing to tell the letter recipient, staying nearby to scaffold and encourage as the child writes these sentences. On yet another day, the child thinks of and writes, all on his own, some questions to ask the letter recipient, showing his work to the teacher when he’s done.

- **Aim for measurable outcomes.** For example, whether the child completed the daily writing tasks is easily measurable by both the teacher and child.
- **Chart success.** Each day that the student completes his letter-writing task, for instance, he might get a check mark on a grid. The concrete, visual representation can be highly motivating to children and is a way for them to reflect on their behavior. (See Practice 8 on page 88 for more on helping students reflect.)
- **Increase the challenge gradually.** Rather than simply being asked to stay on task longer or do greater quantities of work, the struggling child should also be given more complex and interesting tasks. This lets him feel competent and can increase motivation over time. For example, as the child shows readiness, he might have the choice of adding a drawing or map to his letter, along with an explanatory sentence. Of course, it's important that teachers provide help so children will succeed as they're given more challenges.
- **Find ways for the class to acknowledge the child's work.** It's vital, for example, that the student have a turn reading his finished letter aloud just like the rest of the class or have an equal spot in author circles, project displays, and work sharings.

Helping individual students in this way while meeting the needs of the rest of the class is challenging work. Here are just a few ways you can help:

- **Keep encouraging teachers.** Your encouragement means so much to teachers. Continually recognize their patience and diligence.
- **Provide professional development.** Provide staff with training, books, articles, DVDs, and group discussions on individualizing work for struggling students.
- **Advocate for staffing.** Work toward having enough behavior specialists and instructional aides on staff to help provide students with the individualized attention they need.
- **Visit classrooms to connect personally with struggling students.** It matters when you visit. It makes a big impression on these children when their principal or another school leader comes into the class-

room and privately acknowledges their accomplishments by asking, for example, to see their progress notebook or other success-tracking system.

8. Encourage teachers to build in student reflection time

Time for reflection in school too often disappears in the busyness of the school day. Yet some of the deepest learning occurs when, at the end of a lesson, activity, or challenging social situation, students are given time to reflect rather than quickly moved on to the next thing. Over the course of a year, these brief moments can add up to hundreds of golden opportunities to cultivate student understanding and transformation.

Like all children, children who struggle with behavior have an innate ability to reflect on their learning. But because these children often have problems paying attention, educators can sometimes be quick to dismiss their aptitude. Yet reflection can be the very thing that helps these children develop much-needed social and emotional skills. Daniel Siegel, arguing that reflection should be the 4th R in education, writes that “reflective skills harness our prefrontal capacity for executive attention, prosocial behavior, empathy and self-regulation” (Siegel, 2007, p. 262).

You can support teachers in guiding students to reflect on their learning and behavior by encouraging them to use these simple, effective methods:

- **Close each lesson by asking a think-back question.** It’s OK—in fact it’s important—for teachers to take these few minutes before transitioning to the next activity. Possible questions include:
 - ◆ What was the most important idea for you in this (story, piece of writing, math lesson)?
 - ◆ Why do you think we changed our partners in reading today?
 - ◆ What is something you might share with your family tonight about what you learned in science today?
 - ◆ Who remembers what our goal for this lesson was? Did we reach it?

- **End each school day with a closing circle.** The class gathers in a circle for five to ten minutes before dismissal. The teacher asks the children to share one of these:
 - ◆ Something they're proud of from that day
 - ◆ One thing they want to work more on the next day
 - ◆ Something they did to help someone that day
 - ◆ One thing the whole class can be proud of
 - ◆ What a character in a book they're reading might be up to the next day
 (For more about closing circles, see "Closing Circle: A Simple, Joyful Way to End the Day" by Dana Lynn Januszka and Kristen Vincent, *Responsive Classroom Newsletter*, February 2011, www.responsiveclassroom.org.)
- **Check in privately with individual children at the end of the day.** Children who are having a hard time with behavior especially benefit from such check-ins. Teachers should ask specific reflection questions such as the closing circle ones listed above rather than general questions such as "How was your day?" (It's also highly effective for school leaders to come to the classroom to do this check-in with struggling students.)
- **Take five minutes to talk after the class returns from a special.** Before moving on to the next subject, the teacher asks the children to name things they did or learned in that special. Teachers can do a similar five-minute check-in after morning arrival, the midday recess and lunch break, and an all-school meeting.

9. Teach staff to recognize antecedents and to use de-escalation techniques

Adults in school are often surprised when a child's behavior erupts "suddenly." Almost always, however, these behaviors aren't actually sudden. They're preceded by signs that, if we're looking, tell us an explosion is about to come. If we recognize these antecedents, we'll have a chance to de-escalate the tension and prevent the explosion.

To help staff learn to recognize antecedents and use de-escalation techniques:

- **Dedicate staff meeting time to this topic.** Share the de-escalation techniques below with them. Look into bringing in an expert on the topic to give a talk or workshop. Guide staff in role-playing challenging situations with each other.
- **Put it in the staff handbook.** Include information, such as the tips below and key points from de-escalation training, in this resource so staff can review it easily.
- **Make cheat sheets for staff.** Print critical de-escalation steps on cards that staff can post in convenient spots as reminders.
- **Make sure all staff know the procedure for activating the crisis team.** Communicate clearly and often when staff should alert the crisis team and the procedures for doing so (see Chapter 9).



DE-ESCALATION TECHNIQUES TO SHARE WITH STAFF

- **Look for physical signs of tension.** Children often give physical clues that they're about to explode. Look for children balling their fists, holding their breath, drumming their fingers, pacing, and the like.
- **Try a soothing, simple redirection at this point.** Right when a child is showing signs of stress, try to bring down the tension by saying in a calm, soothing voice, "Here, squeeze this, Brian" while handing Brian a ball to squeeze, or "Anna, try taking a few deep breaths. I'll breathe with you for a few minutes."
- **Give the child space if a calm redirection doesn't work.** If the child is already too agitated or if the child's tension mounts, do the following:
 - ◆ **Stay at a comfortable distance.** Sense what distance is comfortable for the particular child. For some children, closer is more comfortable, but for others, it causes more anxiety. If in doubt, err on the side of keeping a greater distance to prevent the child from feeling threatened.

- ◆ ***In general, avoid eye contact.*** Asking an upset child to look at us can ratchet up their anxiety.
 - ◆ ***Talk slowly and quietly.*** It's crucial to do this even if we don't feel calm. Children react sensitively to our tone of voice. Deliberately slowing down our speech can have a soothing effect on a child whose anxiety or upset is escalating.
 - ◆ ***Never take what the child is saying personally.*** The child's explosion is not about us. An upset child, like an upset adult, will often say things that she doesn't mean.
- **Get help.** Whatever intervention is tried, if it's not successful and the child is quickly losing control, it's imperative to get immediate assistance. Use the school's protocol for handling these situations. It is never a sign of weakness to ask for help. It is, rather, a sign of being responsible. _____

A word about take-a-break (positive time-out) for children under stress: Help adults understand that although it can sometimes be effective to have a child go to take-a-break when she's just beginning to be agitated, doing so can also escalate the agitation. Staff members will have to use their judgment. They may have a take-a-break protocol that's effective for most children, but it's OK, and likely necessary, to deviate from it for children with challenging behaviors. (For information about in-classroom take-a-break, see *Rules in School: Teaching Discipline in the Responsive Classroom*, 2nd edition, 2011, available at www.responsiveclassroom.org. For information about out-of-classroom take-a-break, see Chapter 10 of this book.)

10. Provide children with social skills instruction outside the classroom

Social skills lessons in the classroom benefit children with challenging behaviors enormously, just as they benefit all students. But these children typically also need additional small group or one-on-one instruction outside the classroom. This additional social skills instruction, best provided by counselors, speech and language therapists, school social workers, and psychologists, should be built into students' Individual Educational Plans or 504s with the same degree of specificity that we might see for academic interventions.

Finding the right intervention for your school or a particular child you're working with can require some work—there are as many programs for social skills instruction as there are for addressing students' reading or math challenges. These national clearinghouses can lead you to credible programs:

- Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention (www.challengingbehavior.org)
- National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (www.nichcy.org)
- Child Development Institute (www.childdevelopmentinfo.com)
- Wrightslaw (www.wrightslaw.com)
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (www.aacap.org)
- Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice (<http://cecp.air.org>)

Regardless of which approach your school chooses, remember these essentials:

- **Clearly define the intervention.** School leaders should lead in clearly defining the additional social skills training that's right for the school.
- **Advocate tirelessly.** School leaders need to keep speaking out and pushing for social skills services for struggling students. This includes making sure child study meetings include appropriate specialists who are conversant with best practices for social skills instruction.
- **Measure and report progress.** Whatever social skills programs your school chooses, make sure it allows for the setting of clear, measurable goals and includes mechanisms for reporting progress. We expect these elements for academic interventions. We should expect no less for social skills interventions.
- **Allot time.** Provide time for classroom teachers to meet regularly with the school adults who are providing the additional outside-the-classroom instruction to struggling children. This ensures continuity and consistency between the child's lessons inside and outside the

classroom, and it encourages school adults to support each other in the challenging work of teaching struggling children.

- **Be accountable.** We must hold ourselves and our schools just as accountable for providing students the extra social skills instruction they need as for providing the extra math and reading supports they need.

CHIP REFLECTS

On the Child's Side

One of the most important things I've learned as a school leader is that when a student has a persistent behavior problem, what works to restore positive behavior is to get on the child's side and search together for a solution.

Admittedly, it's all too easy to slip into an oppositional stance. Especially when we have too much on our minds, we're tempted to use the "because I'm the principal" approach, demanding respect. I've been there. I've had days when I've wanted to *make* a student behave a certain way.

These are not our shining leadership moments, but they happen. These are times to call on a fellow administrator or a counselor to take the student while we gather ourselves for a few minutes—to have our own take-a-break, if you will.

Then, when we return to the student in a calm state, we can use the *Responsive Classroom* problem-solving conference technique for getting on the child's side to look for solutions. Many teachers use this strategy successfully in classrooms. Here's an adapted version for use by school leaders:

- ◆ **Talking at a calm time.** I make sure the child and I, myself, have calmed down before beginning any problem-solving.
- ◆ **Noting positive things about the student.** "I notice you've been playing in a friendly way with other kids at recess. And you've been eating with some new kids at lunch." This establishes a positive tone for the conversation.

- ◆ **Asking the student's view of what happened.** "Tell me what happened at lunch today."
- ◆ **Describing objectively what I know about the incident.** "I heard that when you and your tablemates disagreed about washing the table, you yelled at them. Then when Ms. Monroe told you to take a break, you threw your book at her."
- ◆ **Asking the student what she or he noticed.** "What else did you notice about what happened?"
- ◆ **Stating the need to solve the problem and inviting the student to work with me on it.** "It's important that we find a way for you to handle stuff like this peacefully even when you're angry. Would you like to work together on that?" (If the student says no, I stop the conversation and look for another way to handle the problem. There's no use forcing a student to collaborate with us.)
- ◆ **Seeing if the child has ideas about what caused the misbehavior.** "Why do you think this happened?" Often children have a hard time articulating the cause. So I use nonjudgmental "Could it be?" language to offer some real possibilities. "Could it be that you were still angry about something that happened at recess? Could it be that when people disagree with you, you get so angry you forget to use kind words?"
- ◆ **Together, thinking of two or three ways to prevent a similar problem in the future.** These ideas will flow from what the child identified as the cause of the misbehavior. Perhaps an idea is that if the child is angry, he'll ask a teacher for help. Or he'll take his turn at table washing for the time being, and then tell a teacher or me later if he feels the matter was unfair.
- ◆ **Agreeing on one idea to try.** I guide the child in picking one of the solutions. I then tell the student that I'll inform his teacher and parents about our plan and check back on his progress later.

(For more about *Responsive Classroom* problem-solving conferences, see *Solving Thorny Behavior Problems: How Teachers and Students Can Work Together* by Caltha Crowe, 2009, and *Teaching Children to Care: Classroom Management for Ethical and Academic Growth, K-8*, revised edition, by Ruth Sidney Charney, 2002. Both are available from www.responsiveclassroom.org.)

FINAL THOUGHT

“Welcome Back!”

One of the most important things school leaders can do to support students is to warmly welcome them back into the school after they’ve needed to leave for behavioral reasons. Students often feel highly vulnerable in this moment of return and can suddenly be overcome with embarrassment, doubt, anger, or shame. Being welcomed by you and gently eased into the activities under way can help relieve these feelings and greatly increase the child’s chances of success. “Welcome back, Brian. I’m so glad to see you in school this morning,” the principal says when Brian returns after an at-home suspension. “I know you can follow our school rule about being kind to others. I’ve seen you smiling and saying ‘thank you.’ I’ll check in with you later to see how things are going.”

Teachers must also value forgiveness and practice it. “Welcome back, Anna. We’re on page thirty-four in our math book. I’ll check in with you in a minute,” Anna’s teacher says when Anna comes back from a take-a-break outside the classroom.

Regardless of how long the student has been gone and what happened before the child left, a genuine and robust “Welcome back” should always be our first response upon the child’s return. In this way, we convey our conviction that the child is worthy and capable. We convey that we have clear expectations of the student and are ready to offer specific supports. This is how school should be for Brian and Anna and for all children.