

Contents

Introduction.....	7
Prevention Principles.....	14
PRINCIPLE ONE:	
Behavior Mainly Occurs in a Relationship	17
PRINCIPLE TWO:	
Effective Teaching Incorporates a Balance of Ritual and Novelty	35
PRINCIPLE THREE:	
It Is Easier to Channel Behavior Than to Stop It	53
PRINCIPLE FOUR:	
Modeled Behaviors Are Internalized	71
PRINCIPLE FIVE:	
Attention Magnifies Behavior.....	91
PRINCIPLE SIX:	
Developmental Levels Influence Behaviors	109
PRINCIPLE SEVEN:	
Behaviors Are Strengthened Through Skill Development	127
PRINCIPLE EIGHT:	
When Overly Stressed, the Thinking Brain Shuts Down	151
PRINCIPLE NINE:	
Behaviors Are Often the Result of Ingrained Habits.....	169
Positive Behavior Principles—The Big Picture	185
Notes	190
Extend the Learning of Positive Behavior Principles	192
Acknowledgements.....	193
About the Author	194

Introduction

“I just want to teach. Is that too much to ask?” This was the sentiment of a new high school teacher I was coaching. At the time, I had just started working at our regional education service center, and as part of my new duties, I was charged with going into schools and providing consultative behavior support to teachers. Needless to say, there was no shortage of work for me. “I went into education because I love math,” the teacher told me. “When I went through school, one of my teachers instilled in me a love for math, and I just want to pass that love on to my students, but I can’t, because I spend all of my time dealing with behavior problems.” After observing her class, I agreed.

This was not the first time I had heard some version of this story. I felt overwhelmed and at a loss for what to say. After providing her a few strategies, I wished her luck, told her I would pray for her, and went on my way. I spent that entire week going from class to class, putting out one fire, only to have another one pop up somewhere else. *Is that it?* I thought. *Strategies, luck, and prayer?* I knew something had to change.

I was one of three behavior consultants offering support in the region, and our job seemed unrealistic. Fortunately, around this same time, my colleagues and I were exposed to a body of work by George Sugai, a researcher from the University of Connecticut, called Positive Behavior Support, as well as training in the Boys Town Education Model (BTEM). Both models emphasized taking a prosocial approach to behavior management, using discipline as an opportunity to teach positive behaviors. The information intrigued me enough to dive in at a much deeper level.

Because the regional needs outweighed the amount of support the three of us were able to provide, my coworkers and I designed the ABC Program. As a way of **Addressing Behavioral Concerns**, we worked with fifty individuals around the region over the course of three years to certify them as behavioral consultants for their school districts. In the first year of the program, we focused on aligning behavioral beliefs. The second year was spent providing the candidates with strategies for offering consultations and presentations, and during the final year, each of the participants had to revamp the discipline efforts at their school, creating alternatives to traditional punishment-based interventions such as in-school suspension (ISS) and detention. Instead, they designed intervention methods based on the teaching of social skills.

This three-year period was transformational for me. Although we designed the program for the regional participants, I learned just as much in my supervisory role. My perspective on behavior shifted and was solidified. I was able to move away from believing in a model of traditional rewards and punishments toward one of teaching. By the end of the program, I felt as though I understood what seemed to work, why it worked, and what needed to be done to move our discipline efforts forward.

Shortly thereafter I was hired as a behavior consultant for a school district, and over the course of the following decade I split my time between working directly with students on behavior issues and providing consultation and staff development for teachers. It was during this time that my body of work seemed to unfold, both in theory and practice.

While going into classrooms to offer support, I saw themes emerged. I discovered that behavior concerns teachers faced seemed to be due to one of the following reasons:

- Instructional Problems: Students misbehaving because they were not engaged in learning
- Modeling: Staff members inadvertently reinforcing negative behaviors through modeling
- Attention Issues: Teachers reinforcing negative behaviors by drawing attention to them
- Crisis Intervention: Staff members getting into power struggles with students
- Relationships: Students not connecting with staff
- Punishment-Based Models: Failed interventions based on negative reinforcement

I found myself offering the same set of suggestions, based on these core issues, the result of which developed into this body of work: Positive Behavior Principles.

Since that time, I have worked with countless schools and teachers, implementing this body of work in their schools. Although I have received a great deal of positive feedback on how this information has helped teachers implement successful strategies in their classroom, I believe the greatest benefit of the principles is one of alignment. Teachers will have a hard time finding success with strategies if they don't align the strategies with their beliefs. And that is what led me to write this book. *Positive Behavior Principles* helps individual teachers, as well as entire schools, align their strategies with their beliefs.

This information is not a program, nor is it a one-size-fits-all set of strategies. It is a framework for helping educators analyze their behavioral perspectives and practices. Teacher strategies should be individualized and will change based on a variety of factors—grade levels, teaching styles, settings, personalities, etc. What works for one teacher might not work for another, but what should remain constant is the philosophy on which the strategies are based. The nine Positive Behavior Principles, at their core, outline a set of beliefs based on a prosocial approach to discipline management:

1. Healthy relationships positively influence student behaviors.
2. Instructional practices impact behaviors.
3. If students' basic needs are not met, behavior concerns will surface.
4. Educators should model expected behaviors.
5. Attention is a powerful tool for shaping behavior.
6. Students' social and emotional developmental levels should be considered when determining interventions.
7. Discipline efforts should be rooted in the practice of teaching and reinforcing behavioral skills.
8. When students are overly stressed, they are not open to behavioral instruction. De-escalation should be the primary concern.
9. Behaviors are not always the result of choice. Habits, as well as a variety of other factors, trigger behaviors. These reasons should be considered when designing interventions.

These beliefs make a great filter through which educators can analyze their practices. I have worked with countless

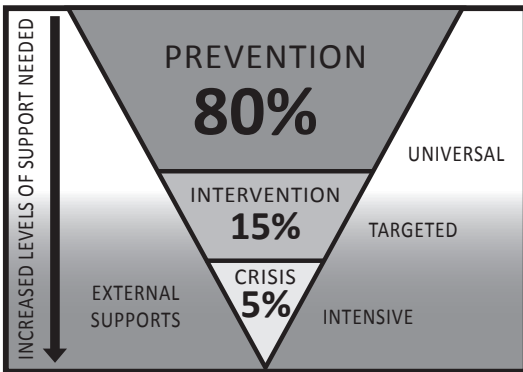
administrators and teachers, implementing this body of work in their schools. And although I have received a great deal of positive feedback on how this information has helped individual teachers implement successful strategies in their classroom, I believe the greatest benefit of the principles is one of alignment.

Positive Behavior Principles help teachers, as well as entire schools, align perspectives and implement successful behavioral strategies that work.

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Positive Behavior Support

The nine Positive Behavior Principles were designed to complement the Positive Behavior Support (PBS) model (now referred to as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, or PBIS) which gained momentum in the late 1990s.¹ This approach is not a specific program, but rather a general framework for improving student behaviors using proactive, positive, and systematic methods.



The PBS triangle outlines three levels of behavioral support needed in schools. At the top of the triangle universal strategies are designed for prevention. Examples include outlining expectations, having consistent routines, and acknowledging positive choices. Though universal strategies are afforded to all students, approximately 80 percent of students in a given setting will be successful with this level of support. Moving down the triangle, roughly 15 percent of students will need additional targeted interventions. Examples could include participation in a social skill group, visual cues, and preferential seating. Despite prevention and intervention efforts, about 5 percent of students need ongoing intensive support due to the severity of their behaviors falling into a level of crisis. Individualized plans are usually needed for this group of students.

The triangle can be likened to a sieve with supports and interventions at each level. When students are unsuccessful at one level, they drop through to the next level where more interventions are afforded. The lower the students go, the more their internal control often decreases, increasing the number of external behavioral supports needed to be successful.

In each of the three sections of the triangle, Positive Behavior Principles are outlined for consideration at that level of support. Although all principles can be utilized at all levels, they should receive special consideration at the level they are outlined. For example, the seventh principle emphasizes the importance of teaching specific behavioral skills. Although all students should receive proactive social skill instruction, targeted behavioral skill development should be one of the main interventions for students with greater

behavior concerns. Also, each section builds on prior sections. For example, the first principle outlines the importance of relationship building. Although this principle is in the first of the three sections, it is the foundation for all principles and, thus, critical at all levels.

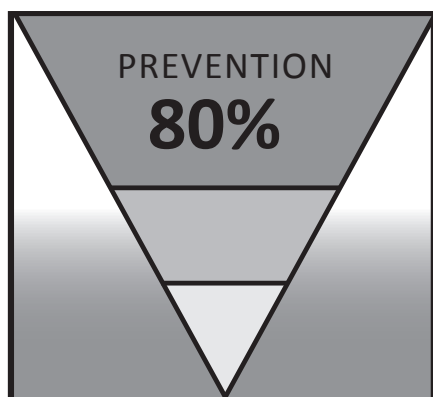
Pick a Student—Any Student

As noted, one of the main goals of this book is to help educators align behavioral perspectives with practices. Although I hope readers have many aha moments while reading, this book is also meant to provide educators with practical classroom strategies. My guess is that if you are reading this, you have students who need high levels of behavioral support. In order to make the most of the information outlined, I recommend picking one of your students to focus on as you read. Think about the implications of each principle and accompanying strategies for that student. By doing so, you are more likely to focus on specific strategies to try, which will increase the chance of theory turning into good practice.

—Dan St. Romain

Prevention Principles

The first four principles are designed to prevent misbehavior and help educators align their philosophy and strategies. When teachers build strong relationships with students, incorporate multimodal teaching strategies, and model healthy behaviors, they provide a strong foundation for good behavior in schools. However, if these practices are not in place, the 80 percent of students who would typically demonstrate appropriate behaviors might have difficulty doing so in these settings.



1. Behavior mainly occurs in a **relationship**.

Our interactions with others shape our behaviors, as visually represented by the shaking hands icon. Rather than trying to focus on student behaviors, or ours, the best strategy is to examine the individual interactions that shape our relationships. When we change the dynamic of our relationships, we will change the behaviors.



2. Effective teaching incorporates a balance of **ritual** and **novelty**.



Teaching practices impact discipline. Teachers who have good teaching practices are more likely to have fewer discipline problems. By balancing instructional practices infused with novelty and grounded predictable rituals, we will have a positive impact on behaviors in the classroom. The icon of the scale is designed to represent this balance.

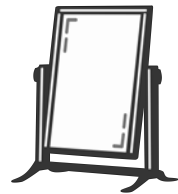
3. It is easier to **channel** behavior than to stop it.



The icon of the water reminds us that when it comes to behavior, it is far easier to channel it than to try and stop it. When we encourage students to get their talking and moving needs met through multimodal instructional practices, we decrease the chance that they will get those needs met in a way that interrupts teaching and learning in the classroom.

4. **Modeled behaviors** are internalized.

We are all shaped by our environment. Since behaviors mainly occur in a relationship, student behaviors are influenced by adults. The mirror icon reminds us to be mindful of what we are teaching through our own behaviors. We want to be positive role models for our students.





Behavior Mainly Occurs in a Relationship

The Wisdom of the Old and the Innocence of the Young

When I first started working at an early childhood center, I learned a lot about human behavior. Trust me. You can't be around three hundred four- and five-year-old children without being enlightened in some way. Though I was billed as the behavior specialist, I often found myself completely at a loss, not knowing what to do when a student went into tantrum mode. And it certainly didn't help that I was a young father of a child who had his own set of challenging behaviors. I quickly realized that I had a lot to learn. Luckily, experience is a great teacher.

As one of my first school projects, I connected our students with residents from a local assisted living facility. Each class "adopted" a foster grandparent. The project was designed to instill a sense of compassion in the children and help them develop empathy for others. I also knew the residents could teach our students some good lessons as well. I just wasn't expecting to be the *recipient* of one of those lessons.

I vividly remember one particular trip to the assisted living center. It was around the holiday season, so our classes were visiting the facility to sing festive songs to the residents. As was often the case, my job was to shadow one specific student who had behavioral difficulties. And as luck would have it, it had been a difficult morning for Zach. No sooner had the class begun to sing the first song when my special friend got upset and wedged himself behind the piano I was playing—in about a twelve-inch crawl space. I tried to coax him out, but that just seemed to make things worse. His behavior escalated as the program continued, and I’m certain my embarrassment and limit-setting approach weren’t helping the situation at all.

As the class left the area, Zach hunkered down, refusing to move. I took a deep breath, knowing my next step was to pry him out from behind the piano. Fortunately for me, one of the wise residents noted my struggles and intervened. “Honey,” she said to him. “Can you help me with this contraption? It’s my walker. It helps me walk. I can’t ever get it open.” She smiled. He smiled. “Oh, it looks like somebody lost a tooth. Did the tooth fairy visit you?” she asked. Zach didn’t answer, but he did come out from behind the piano to help open the walker before running back to join his class.

I stayed behind to thank the resident and apologize for the child’s behavior. She just listened to me and grinned. Upon reflection, I’m certain she knew I didn’t have a great deal of experience working with young children. “Oh honey,” she said, “I reckon he just doesn’t know any better. We all do the best we can. Lord knows I can be just as stubborn. There are times when I’d hide behind that piano too if I

could fit. When you get to be my age, you realize the only thing that really matters is relationships. Everything else is just water under the bridge.” As she wandered off, I heard her mumble, “Ethel, did you see

that boy? He sure was a cutie, that one.” And with that one exchange, that wonderful lady taught me a critical life lesson: positive interactions will always change behavior more effectively than any strict consequence.

*Positive interactions
will always change
behavior more
effectively than any
strict consequence.*

My limit-setting method with Zachary did not change his behavior, and it ultimately resulted in a power struggle. The lady with the walker used distraction, and by taking a different approach, she yielded a completely different outcome. By focusing on relationship instead of consequence, she was able to elicit positive behaviors. After having some time to reflect on how this situation had unfolded, I realized there was a similar, related lesson to learn: change the relationship and you will change the behavior.

It Takes Two

Behaviors do not occur in a vacuum. They are most often the result of an interpersonal dance between individuals. Every time a teacher interacts with a student, the dance begins, and the behavioral outcome is dependent on the nature and quality of our interactions. With each interaction, our responses and reactions contribute to the behavioral end result.

We have all had an interpersonal dance go poorly, like my experience with Zach at the nursing home. We talk with a student to discuss inappropriate behaviors; he gets defensive. We redirect and justify, and before long the two of us are in a full-blown power struggle. We metaphorically step on each other's feet . . . push and pull . . . and invariably, the dance ends with injuries.

Using another analogy, think of our interactions like a tennis match. We serve the ball and the student returns it. If a student hits the ball hard, we are likely to return the ball the same way, and vice versa. Likewise, if the ball is returned in a non-aggressive fashion, we most often follow suit. Our plays are dependent on our student's, and our interactions continually change based on the individual plays. Newton summed it up in his third law of motion: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

I know I am sometimes guilty of placing blame on my students when problems occur. *If he would just She needs to* The problem with this line of reasoning is that it places the blame on the student and not on the interaction. I fail to take into consideration what I am contributing to the interactions and, thus, to the behavior problems. Rather than blaming my student or myself, I need to examine our interactions. By looking for specific ways to strengthen these interactions, we take blame out of the equation, increasing the chances that behavior on both sides will improve.

I also find this small shift in perspective helps us all become less frustrated when problems invariably occur.



Interactions Build Relationships

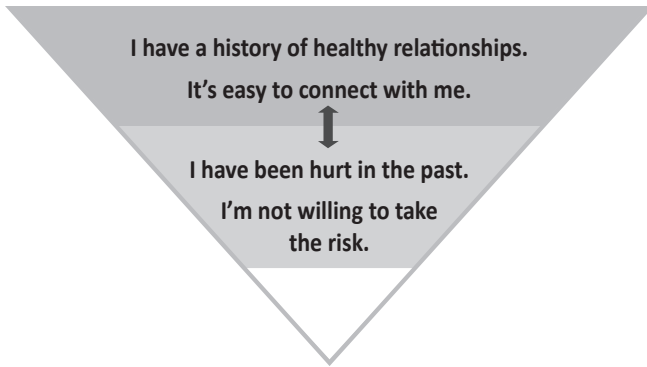
The sum of our interactions determines the type and quality of our relationships. This can work for or against us. When we have a high number of *positive* interactions with our students, good relationships develop. However, the opposite is true as well. Ongoing *negative* interactions will erode trust and damage our relationships in the process.

Think About It . . .

Pick a few students in your classroom and think about the relationship you have formed with each of them. Now think about your daily interactions. Chances are good that the interactions are positive with those students with whom you have good relationships. However, this isn't always the case with students who exhibit challenging behaviors.

Those Who Need Us Most

Interactions serve as a bridge to build relationships. Unfortunately, some students get very adept at putting up solid barriers, blocking attempts to form healthy relationships. In order to build relationships we have to be willing to be vulnerable, because the truth is, when we connect with others, we run the risk of getting hurt. Some students are not willing—or able—to take this risk because they have been hurt in the past. This is especially the case for students who need higher levels of support in the bottom portions of the PBS triangle.



Students who are at the top of the triangle are more likely to have a history of healthy relationships. Because they exhibit appropriate behaviors and interactions, they usually have an easier time connecting with others. However, the farther down students fall in this triangle, the more challenging it can be for them to build healthy relationships. Due to their history of behavior problems, they often develop poor interactional habits, which are carried over into new relationships. Their experience with relationships plays out this way:



This pattern plays out with students guarding themselves from getting hurt by sabotaging interactions before healthy relationships even have a chance to develop. Their survival self-talk becomes:

If I don't take a risk and trust you, I won't get hurt.

Like Child, Like Parent

Just as students guard against getting hurt, parents do the same. One teacher told me, "I've been trying to call Kayton's mother, but I can never reach her. I really believe when she sees it is the school's number on her phone, she purposely won't answer the call." I understand this can be frustrating for that teacher, but rather than getting upset with the parent, we should first try to understand why this might be the case.

If parents had a difficult time when *they* were in school, that emotional baggage is carried over into adulthood. They, like children, put up barriers to avoid connecting with school personnel because they don't trust the institution. They might also fear their own children will have similar experiences of failure, and they disconnect, making it difficult for teachers to form relationships.

This situation is exacerbated for parents of children with behavior problems. When parents receive continual negative feedback about their child, they are likely to distance themselves from the school even more. As one parent put it, "Every time I get a note from the school, I dread opening it. I've talked with my son, taken away his phone, and put him on restriction, but he keeps getting in trouble. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I stopped asking

him about his day or checking his folder a long time ago because it always led to more arguing at home. I don't know what else to do.”

As this parent shows, frustration and embarrassment often feed the hesitancy to form relationships with school staff. As the parent of a child who had behavior concerns, I can relate. At times I felt helpless, not knowing how to support the teacher. Out of desperation I created distance and didn't work to form relationships. My thought was, “If I don't connect with my son's teachers, it won't be as personal when my son misbehaves and I feel as though I have let them down.”

Understanding why students and parents put up barriers to forming relationships does not excuse their behavioral choices. But by understanding the possible reasons for those barriers, we are in a better position to find solutions that result in strengthened relationships.

The Danger of Disconnecting

When students don't form relationships with others and put up walls for self-protection, they have to rely on their own thoughts and beliefs to inform their actions. This is very dangerous for students with behavior problems, as they are at risk for developing very distorted and unhealthy beliefs about their peers and teachers:



If uninterrupted, these thoughts can lead some students to exhibit not only poor, but dangerous behaviors. When we look at the incidents at Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, Columbine, and other school massacres, we find that many of the perpetrators were loners and had damaged relationships. John Van Dreal, psychologist and director of safety and risk management at Salem-Keizer Public Schools in Oregon, analyzed the reason behind many of these horrific incidents. In looking at the perpetrators, Van Dreal says, “A lot of these people have felt excluded, socially left out or rejected . . . They don’t have any adult connection—no one watching out for them. Or no one knows who they are anymore.”²

As the number and frequency of dangerous school incidents rises, administrators and legislators continuously look for ways to stop them. Most proposals call for heightened security: locked doors, bulletproof glass, secured visitor entrances, security guards, mesh backpacks, armed staff members, locker searches, etc. Though these strategies might be effective deterrents, they are primarily reactive in nature. Rather than asking, “How do we stop individuals from bringing weapons into the school?” perhaps, a better question would be “Why do students commit these acts in the first place?” I believe the root of the problem stems from damaged relationships. When some students disconnect from others, they can easily develop a me-against-them mentality, which ultimately drives their extreme behaviors.

The Power of Connecting

Healthy relationships are, more often than not, a more effective deterrent against a violent act than any security measure. If students who have committed these atrocities had at least one person in the school with whom they felt connected, these tragedies would have played out very differently. I believe most of the current measures designed to deal with violence in the schools are security Band-Aids, when the real wounds are based in frayed and damaged relationships. Security measures might stop some dangerous incidents from happening in one snapshot of time, but they do nothing to heal the relationships that fueled them in the first place. They also do nothing to alter the distorted perceptions some students have about their peers and school personnel, which is the real issue needing to be confronted.

Our goal should be to help children and teens feel motivated to do the right thing out of concern for others rather than fear of punishment.

When it comes to behavior, one of the most valuable aspects of a relationship is motivation. When we care about people, we are more likely to take into consideration their thoughts and feelings when we make choices.

Relationships can serve as a filter, helping us inhibit undesirable behaviors. When we care about a person, we develop empathy. Our goal should be to help children and teens feel motivated to do the right thing out of concern for others rather than fear of punishment. This is more likely to be the case in the context of healthy relationships.

Relationship Building Strategies



It's not always easy to build a relationship with a hurt child, but it is most definitely worth the effort. A healthy student-teacher relationship is the foundation for good behavior in the classroom. Students who trust and respect their teachers will work harder to please them. This is the motivation we want for better behavior in the classroom. In order to build positive relationships, we need positive interactions. When we interact with students, our choices determine whether students put up walls and disconnect from healthy relationships or tear down walls and allow themselves to be vulnerable and connect with us. Here are some strategies for helping them choose healthy connection:

Have Individual Discussions with Students

Interacting with students in a whole group setting is not nearly as impactful or personal as doing so on an individual basis. A teacher can't build individual relationships well in a group setting. This is a problem with large class sizes. The more students in a class, the fewer the individual interactions a teacher can have and the more the quality of those interactions will suffer. You can combat this concern by having individual conversations with students you have identified as being most in need of them. The interactions needn't be long, just individual. This is best accomplished when you can talk with the student alone—in between classes or any time other students are not present. As an added bonus, when you get a student alone, the student will be more apt to

let their defenses down, be genuine, and not become clouded by the influence and behaviors of peers.

Talk About Anything but School

Many students, especially those with academic or behavioral challenges, have negative perceptions about school, so when we discuss school-related topics, they shut down. However, when discussing other subjects, such as sporting events or new movies, the school associations don't negatively cloud the interactions and we are able to connect with students on a personal level. We are no longer teachers; we are people. We have all experienced the phenomenon of seeing a student at a restaurant and being greeted with surprise, "I didn't know you ate here!" They are essentially saying, "I've never looked at you as a person, like me, who eats at restaurants. I've always seen you as a teacher. I just thought you lived at school." Talking about non-school related topics helps us strengthen our overall communication and, thus, our relationships with our students.

Find Students' Interests

When we learn about things that are important to our students, we show individual concern. This goes a long way in helping our students feel special for their unique interests. Additionally, when we know what our students like, we are able to build on their interests accordingly. Attending a concert where a student is playing, making content connections based on interests, and commenting on non-school related talents are all ways to validate our students and strengthen our relationships with them in the process.

Acknowledge Individual Attributes and Changes

Students notice when we notice them. When we acknowledge differences or take an interest and comment on differences, we send the message, “I know you well enough to know something is different.” This sends the message to the student that we care about their well-being. Simple statements like, “Did you get a haircut over the weekend?” or “You seem upset this morning” go a long way in helping our students feel seen.

Choose to Redirect and Praise Privately

Being called out in public repeatedly can damage relationships. When possible, redirection should be given to students individually through nonverbal signals, eye contact, and private discussions. This is also the case with praise, as some students are embarrassed by public attention. When we call out students in a group setting, we run the risk of embarrassing them. We also set up a good kid/bad kid mindset. The ones who are singled out for positive reasons are the “good kids,” and the students who are called out for repeated redirection are the “bad kids.” You can avoid this labeling by using individual private interactions as opportunities to provide feedback.



PERSPECTIVE SHIFT

If an administrator called you out in a faculty meeting for correction of any type or asked you to stand up repeatedly for praise, my guess is these incidents would make you uncomfortable. You would probably be embarrassed.

The same is true for students. Private individual acknowledgements, both positive and negative, are more effective when given personally.

Connect Students with a Trusted Adult Mentor

Many schools connect students with adult mentors to provide extra support. This is a good strategy; however, too often mentors are chosen *for* students rather than *with* them. By seeking input and determining whom the child most trusts, we are able to build on existing healthy relationships. The stronger the connection students have with their mentors, the more likely the mentors will be able to positively shape the behavior of their mentees. Former teachers, lunch monitors, coaches, counselors, and administrative staff can make great mentors; however, the person's position is not what matters. What matters is finding an individual with whom a student has the most natural connection. When problems arise, it is the person with the best relationship with the student who will most likely be able to broach the incident in a way that will result in a positive change in behavior.

Let Counselors Counsel

Although students, like adults, have a need to connect, some students don't know how to connect. They lack the specific skills to form healthy relationships and need support from school counselors. Unfortunately, many counselors lack the time to offer this support since a great deal of their time is spent carrying out non-counseling duties, such as testing responsibilities, master schedule support, 504 and special education meetings, and so on. Just as we provide tiered support for students struggling

academically, we should also provide students with tiered support for behavior. This means priorities need to shift, allowing counselors more time for doing the job for which they were trained—supporting the social and emotional needs of our students.

Put Students in Leadership Roles

When we give students responsibilities, we send the message, “I trust you.” This strategy not only serves to strengthen our rapport with students, but it also provides them with a chance to make good choices. Providing students with leadership roles also allows adults collectively to focus on students’ strengths.

It is very easy to lose sight of the importance of relationship-building when dealing with difficult behaviors.

Sometimes we get so lost in the immediacy of our own needs and frustrations that we fail to remember the long-term goals we are trying to accomplish with students. As a consultant, teachers often say things like, “I don’t know why I send Daniel to the office. The administrators don’t do anything. In fact, Daniel likes going there.”

This is something teachers often tell me about students who are repeatedly sent to the office for misbehavior. After meeting with administrators, I realize the problem is not one of poor strategy; it is a



CAUTION

problem of conflicting mindsets. When teachers are looking for a hierarchy of consequences as the means of changing a student's behavior and administrators are focused on relationship-building and creating teachable moments around cause and effect, the result will be frustration for all involved.

I believe administrators focus on relationship-building with students because they understand that disciplining students in the absence of a relationship can often fuel inappropriate behaviors and make things worse. They also know the stronger the connection they have with students, the more receptive the students will be to their interventions.

In Summary . . .

Behaviors almost never occur in isolation. They are impacted by the responses and reactions of others. A student can be placed in several different classrooms and, based on the interactions of the teacher and other students, exhibit very different behaviors in each setting. Analyzing the interplay of these interactions is the first step in creating positive behavior change. When faced with behavioral challenges, a teacher must first ask, "What am I doing to strengthen my relationship with this student?" This is not the only factor impacting the outcome; however, as the connection between the student and teacher improves, the child will be more likely to strive to make positive behavioral choices.

FINAL THOUGHT

One of the most effective ways to create positive behavioral change, be it with students, parents, or colleagues, is to build healthy relationships. When you improve relationships, you improve behaviors.