



# INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS BEHAVIORAL NEEDS FOR STUDENTS WITH IEPs

## Strategies to Change Mindsets: How Adults Proactively Prepare for Behaviors that Interfere with Learning

It is important to understand the role of all adults when addressing and responding to student behavior that interferes with a student's learning or the learning of others. When thinking about "changing student behavior" the focus should be on how all adults are teaching and supporting the student, not just about changing the behavior of the student. To proactively support student responses, adult mindsets should focus on adapting the response or approach of those who interact with the student, as well as changes to the student's environment. In addition, adults should continue to examine and address their own biases and beliefs about student behavior, race, ability, socioeconomic status, and other factors.

### Opposing Mindsets for "Academic" versus "Behavioral" Needs of Students

The Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams to address both the unmet academic and functional needs of students. Both unmet academic and functional needs can result in a student demonstrating behavior that interferes with their own learning or the learning of others.

A critical step to support the behavioral needs of students is for adults to create a mindset that treats behavioral needs in the same way most adults treat the academic needs of students. For example, when a student is struggling to meet academic expectations, adults typically have a mindset that the student needs help and support to improve their academic skill(s). Adults respond by identifying the skill(s) a student needs to improve, provide additional support and instruction to address the academic skill(s), and monitor the interventions to ensure the interventions are assisting the student with making progress. In addition, when a student demonstrates academic needs, adults often make changes to the educational environment by providing multiple options for the student to access, engage, and respond to academic content. This may include incorporating the use of assistive technology, providing the student with accessible educational

materials, or providing other accommodations or modifications that remove barriers to learning and support the student in becoming an expert learner.

Unfortunately, unlike academic needs, adults typically have a mindset that when a student's behavior interferes with their learning or the learning of others, it is purposeful or within the control of the student. This may be because, unlike some unmet academic needs, a student's unmet behavioral needs may fluctuate over time and across environments and activities. It is also helpful to also consider the interaction between behavioral and academic needs. If a student is struggling to meet an academic expectation, the student's response may be a behavior that interferes with their learning or the learning of others.

An adult mindset that views the student as the problem rarely addresses "why" the student is demonstrating a behavior that interferes with their learning or the learning of others. This mindset does not account for the instruction, curriculum, and educational environment that can be adjusted by the adult, and rarely leads to the adult identifying a skill or support that a student may need to address the behavior. In addition, when unmet behavioral needs are not identified, adults typically respond to those needs with reprimands, punishment, disciplinary removals, and even the use of seclusion or physical restraint. These adult responses not only do nothing to assist the student in learning new skills, change the educational environment, or remove barriers to learning but they also can have negative long term physical, social, emotional, and educational outcomes for students.

Thus, understanding and responding to behavior as a form of communication for an unmet need as well as considering the context, setting, and the behavior of adults and other students is necessary to create an environment where all students experience a sense of success and belonging. There are several practical strategies to help adults develop a mindset that leads them to be more intentional in their responses to student behavior, especially when the behavior significantly interferes with the learning of the student and their peers. The following list offers simple strategies to create a positive learning environment and help change adult mindsets about student behavior.

- **Model social and emotional competencies and incorporate them into existing curriculum and instruction.** Consider how modeling and integrating [social and emotional competencies](#) into the school day can support the needs of all students including students with significant behavioral needs.

- **Use resources from Wisconsin DPI School Mental Health Framework**, including [Trauma Sensitive School Online Professional Learning](#) and [Wisconsin Social and Emotional Competencies](#), that can be embedded into daily learning and interactions between students, families, and staff.
- **Increase student autonomy and shared decision-making with students.** Students should be engaged in establishing clear and observable classroom and school behavioral expectations. This includes collaborating with students, families, and other staff on individual academic and functional IEP and learning goals that have an impact on observable student behaviors. See [CAST UDL Tips for Developing Learning Goals](#) for ideas to engage students in shared decision-making.
- **Improve the quality and frequency of feedback.** Feedback should focus on a student’s learning growth, demonstration of social and emotional and other functional skills, and use of accommodations and supports. It should not be focused on the number or frequency of behaviors that interfere with learning. Research clearly demonstrates that feedback that is specific, positive, and delivered contingently makes a difference in student learning.
- **Engage students in collaborative problem-solving.** Provide direct instruction, when needed, to help students identify how their feelings and emotions affect their behavior, as well as how their behavior can affect their feelings and emotions. Engage students in developing goals and strategies to better meet their needs within the expectations of the classroom and school setting.
- **Respond with reinforcement that is objective, consistent, timely, and positive.** Adults should consistently reinforce and acknowledge students for demonstrating expected academic and functional behaviors. Provide students with reinforcement as close to the point from when they demonstrated the behavior as possible. Teach, practice, and provide frequent feedback as students learn new academic and functional skills.
- **Individualize reinforcement to each unique student.** All students, as well as all adults, have different ways they receive reinforcement for their behavior. Some may prefer verbal praise and public acknowledgement, while for others this may feel stigmatizing, embarrassing, or anxiety-inducing. Some may require tangible or physical reinforcement (e.g., activities or items), while others may only require more subtle reinforcement. It is important for adults to engage with each student to determine what type of reinforcement is most relevant.

- **Stay focused and teach students what is expected of them.** Communication between adults and students should focus on what the student can do rather than what the student should not do. Providing negative consequences for behavior that interferes with learning does not result in a student knowing what to do at that moment or in the future. It is critical to teach, re-teach, model, and reinforce academic and functional expectations frequently and over time. Taught expectations must be meaningful and relevant to the student.
- **Provide positive supports and specify expected behaviors calmly to redirect behavior.** Do not wait for behavior that interferes with learning to escalate before providing interventions and supports. Supports may address a student's physical or medical, social and emotional, cognitive, academic, communication, or independence and adaptive needs. Supports may also include a combination of special education services, including supplementary aids and services (e.g., accommodations, modifications, assistive technology), related services, specially designed instruction, or program modifications and supports for school staff.
- **Be strategic about when to respond to behavior.** It is not necessary to respond to every behavioral incident that fails to meet expectations. It is necessary to consider the student's present state of emotional regulation and overall self-concept in comparison with the severity of the behavior when determining whether a response will support the student's behavioral growth or further escalate student behavior and potentially hinder their sense of belonging.
- **Use data to guide the decision-making process.** Decisions about interventions should be based on evidence about what is or is not working and the effectiveness of changes to the learning environment and implementation of evidence-based improvement strategies. Systematically collect, compile, and analyze data on both adult behaviors (e.g., fidelity of implementing an evidence-based practice) and student outcomes (measures of skill development, use of a support, independence, and a reduction of behaviors that interfere with learning). Utilize [culturally responsive problem-solving resources](#) to guide the collection and analysis of data.
- **Remember that implementing new behavioral instruction and support takes time.** When implementing a new intervention, do not give up if the student does not seem to be responding immediately. Just like teaching a new academic skill, it can take time for students to learn new skills and utilize behavioral supports.

## Reflection and Application Activities

The following reflection and application activities were developed to build the knowledge, skills, and systems of adults so they can assist students with accessing, engaging, and making progress in age or grade level curriculum, instruction, environments, and activities.

1. Which of the above practices do teachers use consistently as classroom-wide strategies or as strategies to meet the individual needs of students? Which practices need to be implemented or improved?
2. How do you know if school staff are consistently providing positive behavioral supports and interventions with fidelity? How might you improve your knowledge of effective implementation of systems and practices?
3. How will your school or district train and support staff to implement practices and systems to support students with significant behavioral needs?
4. From the list in this series, what additional practices or systems are needed to support students with significant behavioral needs?
5. Review the DPI [Intensive Supports](#) web page or the modules from [Trauma Sensitive Schools Online Professional Development](#) page. How might these strategies support students with significant behavior needs?
6. How is your school incorporating [social and emotional learning competencies](#) into the school curriculum and day to day interactions with students? How are staff modeling and purposefully identifying when these competencies are being used by adults and students throughout the school day?
7. Using the [Inclusive Learning Communities \(ILC\) Practice Profile](#), from the Wisconsin DPI [RPIC Project](#), review the essential attributes of a learning environment that is inclusive of each and every learner.
  - Consider the core competency area of Inclusive Mindsets. How are adults capitalizing on behaviors and mistakes?
  - Reflect if the use in practice is Expected, Developmental or Unacceptable.
  - What are the areas of strength and needs for adults in the building?

8. Reflect on your short term and long term emotional response to students with behaviors that interfere with learning. Effectively managing classroom environments, academics, and behavior can be emotionally taxing for educators.
- What steps can you take to support your own health and well-being?
  - What support can the school community put in place to help support teacher well-being?



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