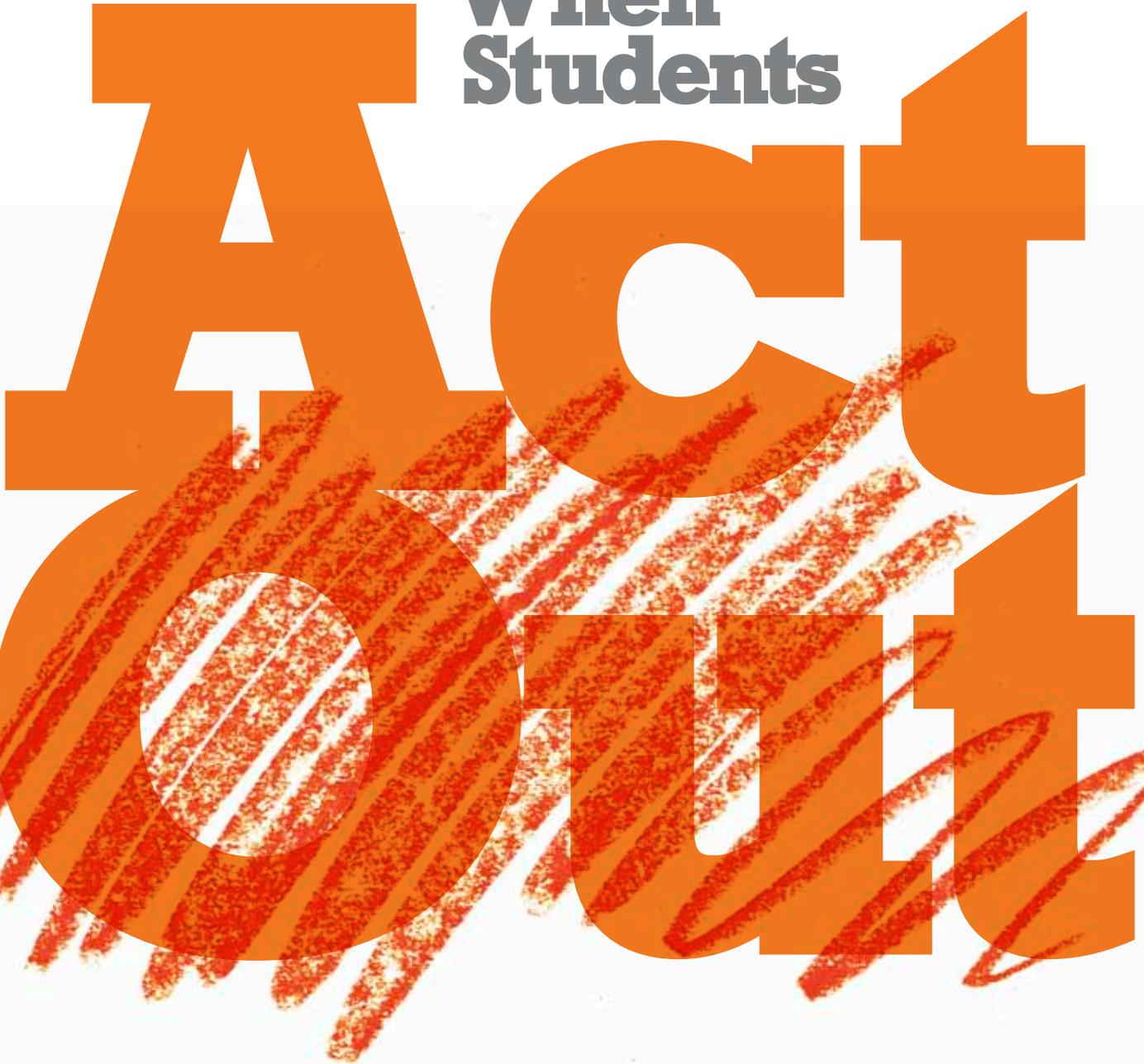


When Students

Act Out



SIX PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH **CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS**.

By Tess Johnston, Kristy Snyder, and Christopher Wooleyhand

Students' behaviors are learned, and each one serves a purpose—getting a teacher's attention, for instance, or expressing emotions. Managing those not-so-positive behaviors can be quite a challenge—but it also presents educators with a golden opportunity to teach students positive, pro-social, problem-solving actions.

Some 13 to 20 percent of U.S. children have mental disorders, according to the Centers for Disease Control. A positive, supportive approach to school discipline can not only improve learning experiences for these students, but also sustain *all* students in the learning community.

Principals, teachers, parents, and support staff should work together to execute comprehensive approaches to support positive behavior. The following six practices lay a foundation for lasting student growth.

1 Create a Community

Relationships matter. Students need to feel a sense of community within the classroom and within their school. One way to accomplish this is by holding regular community meetings in the classroom. These meetings, usually conducted in a group circle, allow students and teachers the opportunity to go over the events of the day, share feelings, and problem-solve through an ongoing dialogue.

In these meetings, teachers can ask a “question of the day” that gets children thinking and responding while collaborating with other students. Questions can be generated from current events, student interests, or from generic “what if” prompts that trigger students to think critically. Students can be guided to respond one at a time while sharing their thoughts in a respectful atmosphere. Teachers can use a “talking piece”—such as a small stuffed animal, stress balls, or a plastic microphone—so that everyone knows whose turn it is to talk.

In such an exercise, everyone in the circle gets to know one another through a different lens, which

increases communication skills and promotes respect in the classroom. Teachers and administrators can use the daily meetings to build relationships and discuss discipline issues with students. Issues can be resolved as a group, leading to overall improved classroom behavior.

2 Provide Consistency

All students need consistency; they must understand the rules of the class and the building in order to monitor their own behavior and choices. Teachers need to consistently enforce rules for all students to establish clear expectations.

When identifying classroom rules, teachers should consider allowing students to help create three to five nonnegotiable expectations for the group, and then follow up by asking students to justify the importance of the rules they create and the positive implications that the rules will have on their learning. This exercise promotes a sense of student ownership in the classroom. Teachers should post the rules in the classroom and refer to them as needed throughout the day.

To increase buy-in, students can sign their names below the rules to signify that they have made an “official” promise. In addition, teachers can offer a safe and supportive learning environment for their students by using immediate and specific praise, as well as tangible and intangible rewards on a consistent basis. These rewards can be as simple as verbal praise, a positive phone call home, extra computer time, stickers, or lunch with a favorite teacher. Students with mental health issues, who are often very aware of their shortcomings, treasure the moments when they make positive choices and meet teacher expectations.

3 Expect and Plan for Breaks

At some point in the school day, students with challenging behavior can become noncompliant and refuse to follow the rules, even after several reminders. When this occurs, the student may simply need time to regroup. Teachers should create an area in the classroom where students can go to gather their thoughts and take some calming breaths. This can be a desk or table in a quiet part of the room. When the student feels able, he or she can return to his or her regular seat and begin participating with the class or small group.

When in-class supports do not work, students may need to leave the classroom for a short period of time. Placing a desk in the hallway next to the classroom for this purpose can be helpful, if an assistant is available to watch over the student. Once the student is calm, the assistant can engage the student by discussing problem-solving

strategies and then have him or her return to class when he or she is ready.

Sometimes a student must be removed completely from the classroom when interventions have become unsuccessful. Alternative settings may include another classroom, a crisis room, or an office. Out-of-classroom timeouts should be used after a variety of interventions have been tried in the classroom. Often, students with emotional issues try to avoid completing tasks that are too difficult and quickly realize that negative choices can lead to an alternative environment that does not require work completion. When removing a child, the teacher needs to make the administration aware of the circumstances that led to the behavior, as well as the interventions that were attempted in the classroom.

Classroom removals can increase students' aggression and emotions, so students may need time to calm down and process the situation individually before being able to think through the implications of their actions. Once the student is calm, problem-solving with support staff can begin. Successful problem-solving techniques include the use of "I" statements, think-sheets, life space interviewing, and peer mediation. When the administrator and student both feel that the student is able to return to class, the student should be allowed to sit in the time-out area in the classroom to facilitate the transition, if needed. The classroom teacher should avoid reliving the student's actions, and instead welcome the child back with

positive demeanor, body language, and communication.

At all times, the teacher must remain calm and consistently uphold the rules. In welcoming the student back to the classroom, help him or her to get caught up on missed work. Using timeouts helps teachers avoid power struggles and allows them to continue instruction with minimal interruptions for the other students.

4 Grow Problem-solvers

Students with emotional issues often resort to inappropriate behavior when they encounter challenging situations. Behaviors can quickly escalate from yelling and refusing to work to throwing objects and fleeing the classroom. The irony is that these negative behaviors often get students exactly what they want: removal from the situation and attention for the behavior.

Administrators and teachers must incorporate problem-solving skills during teachable moments. Primary students can be given a worksheet that has pictures of the rules of the class so that they can discuss which rule was broken and how to better handle a similar situation in the future. Intermediate-level students can be given think-sheets to write down the behavior and why it is inappropriate. They should then be prompted to identify alternatives to the behavior that are in line with the rules of the classroom. An adult should then discuss the think-sheet with the student before he



or she returns to class.

The International Institute for Restorative Practices promotes the use of restorative justice in community circles in order for students to discuss how their behavior impacts others, as well as collaborate on solutions. Students who were part of the problem are now responsible for making things right with the rest of the class and/or school community. Supporting the social/emotional needs of students with challenging behaviors includes helping them take responsibility for their actions so that negative patterns can be reduced.

5 Keep Detailed Notes

Educators must record student behavior in order to monitor progress for each student. This is particularly important for the social/emotional and behavioral goals written on individualized education plans and behavior plans. Educators can use a

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- Intervention Central offers a menu of **teacher behavioral strategies**.
- Find resources from Laura Riffel, also known as the **Behavior Doctor**.
- Learn about nonviolent **crisis intervention training**.
- The International Institute for Restorative Practices is a graduate school devoted to the teaching, research, and dissemination of **restorative practices**.



based on the needs of the students and practiced in a supportive environment offer students with emotional disabilities the best chance of success.

Accentuate the Positive

Students with challenging behaviors need to have structure and supports in place to have successful school experiences. Principals play a vital role in helping to establish positive school culture with academic and behavioral expectations that include consistent consequences for inappropriate behavior. To set a schoolwide tone, principals should schedule time during the week to allow teachers to collaborate on classroom management strategies with the school counselor, social worker, or psychologist.

Because students with the most challenging behaviors require multiple levels of support, teachers, parents, and administrators should make sure to work together. Sometimes the first step is asking for help. The outpouring of support and advice will probably be reassuring and reaffirming. Laura Riffel, known to many as the Behavior Doctor, offers an important reminder in her 2010 booklet, *Target the Behavior, Not the Student*. Riffel reminds us that, “Every child, every day, does at least one thing right.” Our job is to capitalize on those “right” things and build from there. 

Tess Johnston is assistant principal of Glendale Elementary School in Glen Burnie, Maryland.

Kristy Snyder is principal of Glendale Elementary School. **NAESP MEMBER**

Christopher Wooleyhand is principal of Richard Henry Lee Elementary School in Glen Burnie, Maryland, and an adjunct instructor of teacher leadership at McDaniel College. **NAESP MEMBER**

point sheet divided into equal time increments for specific targeted behaviors, anecdotal records, tally sheets, and many other formats to record behavior based on the student’s needs. Younger students may need visual cues, such as stickers on a chart on their desk, in order to know how they are doing during the day.

At the end of the day, teachers should hold a conference with each student about his or her point sheet and the targeted behaviors to celebrate personal successes while identifying future goals. Point sheets also communicate to parents how the day progressed. These can also be used, with parental consent, to inform doctors and therapists about behavioral trends.

6 Teach Pro-social Skills

A key component for assisting students in learning appropriate behaviors and interpersonal skills is regularly incorporating social skills

lessons in the classroom. Students can be taught anger management skills, how to get along with others, how to make friends, how to deal with worries, and other strategies for managing their emotions.

In addition, concerns specific to each classroom can be addressed on a weekly basis by the school social worker after collaborating with the teacher. Often, classroom teachers are fully aware of the student dynamics in their classrooms and can pinpoint specific students’ behaviors that interrupt the positive, cohesive environment in the classroom.

When educators differentiate social skills lessons to meet students’ specific needs, they can direct activities to support positive decision-making. In addition, classroom teachers can use strategies taught in social skills lessons to promote a consistent and cohesive learning environment. Purposeful and targeted social skills lessons that are