Ready…Set…Success

A Formula for Leading Schools with *Love*

For compassionate discipline to be more than just a good intention, it requires a framework.

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We work with administrators all over the world who believe in supporting students with compassion and leading schools with love. But they tell us about incredible challenges they face in ditching traditional behavior-management practices like punitive or public discipline tactics. Often this is because educators have vastly different beliefs about how to address behaviors that are challenging. Because of these different beliefs, students are asked to follow countless approaches, often without consistency or transparency, which leads to confusion, frustration, and, actually, *more* challenging behaviors. To address these issues, leaders often turn to standardized programs to get staff on the same page and to support students with a consistent approach—even when the programs aren't aligned with the type of loving and inclusive practices they seek.

If this sounds like you or your school or district, know that you are not alone. Leading a paradigm shift from traditional behavior-management practices toward compassionate behavior support requires a different

mindset, heartset, and skillset. It requires a different framework of understanding for how to support students across various ages. We call ours *Ready*, *Set*, and *Success* (Causton & MacLeod, 2020a). This framework is a practical guide for authentically including students using humanistic behavioral support.

Ready!

Ready means getting your entire school system clear on three shared understandings, essential to supporting learners inclusively and successfully: (1) "normal" is a myth, (2) relationships, belonging, and inclusion are critical ingredients, and (3) "bad" behavior is not at all what it seems. Achieving a shared understanding in a school system is the first step in rolling out successful humanistic supports, because our understandings drive our thoughts, actions, and daily decisions with students.

"Normal" is a myth. We can spend a great deal of time and energy in school systems clarifying just how many standard deviations a student is from the norm. But the concept of normalization marginalizes students based on issues of

differences such as perceived ability, behavior, race, and language. We often do this norming with the best of intentions. However, the negative impact begs us to shift our practices to understanding one thing: *difference* is the only norm. Normal behavior, normal academic achievement, normal communication styles, or normal social skills—frankly, whatever you are attempting to normalize!—are myths. Every human being in our school system differs greatly in every single area of development and learning. And only when we can see differences as a form of valuable human diversity can we have the mindset and heartset for this important work.

Relationships, belonging, and inclusion. By relationships, we mean authentic, trusting relationships. The kind of bonds that take time, true acceptance, and energy. It is seductive to think that relationships can be built in quick or simple ways, but there are no shortcuts to forming and fostering relationships that allow humans to trust one another. We must put the majority of our energy into developing these bonds with all of our students, while also ensuring we renew and replenish ourselves for this critical work. And perhaps most important, when the relationships with students are difficult, we must consistently persist with grace and love.

Belonging is a deep psychological need that all human beings have. We are hard-wired to seek connection with others and are constantly looking for signals that we are welcome, accepted, valued, and physically and emotionally safe so we can be our whole, authentic selves. Additionally, our nervous systems need repeated examples to show us that if we struggle, we will be met with grace, kindness, and acceptance.

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Critically, we cannot create a sense of belonging for all if some students are in separate programs or classrooms for students with specific labels or perceived deficits. Outdated notions of creating spaces and places to build skills (behavior, academic, social) outside of the general education classroom need to change drastically. To create an inclusive school, all students must be welcome members of the general education environment every day, and students and educators must have appropriate and at-the-ready support.

"Bad" behavior is not what it seems. We have seen all types of behavior in schools labeled as "bad" or unacceptable—brandishing scissors while hopping across desks, stripping naked and running down the hall, drug use, fighting. And we know you are thinking: "Well, these *are* bad behaviors!" While we agree they are unwanted and often maladaptive ways for a student to cope, they are not wholly unexpected. They are natural human responses, albeit sometimes big and unpleasant responses, to a human's stressed neurological system. "Bad" behavior can be understood better by these three phrases:

1. "Bad" behavior is a typical and human reaction to stress.

2. "Bad" behavior is a way of communicating.

3. "Bad" behavior is the body seeking safety using the fight, flight, freeze, or faint response.

And while the three shared understandings about "bad behavior"

are necessary to create a paradigm shift, educators must also recognize that existing behavior-management methods don't work long-term. When educators use rewards and punishments (sticker-charts, public discipline, timeouts, detentions, or suspensions), which are grounded in compliance and control, they may "work" temporarily, or in the moment, but they don't help students develop critical relationships, self-regulation skills, or coping strategies. Conversely, outdated management methods often lead to increased negative outcomes for students, such as distrust between educators and students and decreased self-worth and self-esteem. For educators to feel confident and prepared to support students in new ways, they must develop skillsets to help students feel safe, seen, and soothed and try to reframe challenging behavior as communication.

Set!

When students experience big emotions—as their nervous system shifts into fight, flight, freeze, or faint, and as they are no longer able to manage the energy and tension within their bodies—educators need effective practices to support them.

Even "during the storm" of a meltdown, educators must be a safe harbor for their students. This means taking a deep breath, modeling calm, and being curious. However, in the moment, deep breathing and staying calm can be hard! Educators not only have to support the student who is

experiencing a big emotion, they also have to consider all the other students, as well as many other teaching responsibilities. What often happens during the storm is that educators become stressed and react in a variety of unconstructive ways. For example, they may go into fight or flight themselves and verbally threaten a student, move quickly to fix what they see as the problem, or merely slip into overdrive by giving too many verbal directions and corrections. Other times, educators have the opposite reaction (freeze or faint). They may become confused and unsure of what to do. This can lead to sending the student to an isolated spot, to another educator's room, or to the office.

So what can educators do instead? How can they be a safe harbor, and return to teaching as quickly as possible? One solution is to "double down" on making sure the student's nervous system registers that they are *safe* (emotionally and physically), that they are *seen*, and their system feels *soothed*. Building upon attachment science, Figure 1 includes three strategies that promote optimal teacher-student relationships, even during the middle of a storm.

Stress, as defined by Stuart Shanker, a psychologist and self-regulation researcher, is anything that requires us to burn energy to remain operating at our functional best (Shanker, 2021). Thus, stress can entail everyday things like consuming too much sugar or too much screen time. Stress can also come as a result of life-altering events like teaching through a pandemic or facing racism and ableism in our schools. When educators understand that "misbehaviors"

FIGURE 1. Strategies to Promote Optimal Teacher–Student Relationships	
Strategy Defined	**Strategy in Action**
Ensuring students feel safe: Students feel safe when teachers are not the source of fear but instead the source of calm. There are no threats, uncertainty, and/or feelings of being controlled to set off "internal alarms."	Safety in action is when educators: • validate a student's feelings, • give students time to process their emotions, • aim to feel and understand the student's perspective, • offer choices, • work to address what the student needs.
Ensuring students feel seen: Feeling seen means the student feels valued, cared for, and that they matter, their ideas matter, and their thoughts and feelings matter.	Seeing students is when educators: • listen to understand, • "tune into" the student's thoughts and feelings, • avoid rushing to fix things, • challenge their own implicit biases and/or challenge systems of oppression.
Ensuring systems are soothed: Soothed systems are when students experience inner calm and their emotions aren't overpowering them. Soothed also means the student's system is allowing them to be flexible and make conscious decisions.	Soothing a student's system in action is when educators: • reduce stressors, • express empathy (verbally and non-verbally), • allow for the processing of emotions, • attend to student's needs for safety, satisfaction, and connection.

(such as aggression, arguing, or ignoring), are actually a student's response to stress, they can start to change the strategies they use in response. Figure 2 (p. 24), for example, shows several steps for reframing misbehavior so that educators can address it more constructively.

Success!

To implement a successful school-wide behavior support program,

students must serve as authentic partners in the planning and implementation of their own behavior supports. And leaders and educators must feel successful in this work and reflect on improvement. For this process to succeed, staff must first be grounded in the ideas presented in *Ready* and *Set*, because the process is not about compliance or control of students, but instead invites love, compassion, and trust into the process of support.

Collaboration is key. Creating an individual success plan with a student is an active and engaging process. Unlike the creation of traditional student Behavior Intervention Plans, where educators create ideas for stopping "bad" behavior or reinforcing "good" behavior without the student present, we suggest immediately involving the student and family. Start by asking them what they need to feel safe, seen, and soothed—in essence, to be successful.

The process can take time and can include anyone who cares about the student and their success. We give the team the space, time, and support necessary to brainstorm solutions to specific problems or stressors they are experiencing. This framework prioritizes relationships, ensures students have a deep sense of belonging, and teaches needed skills such as self-awareness, self-determination, self-agency, self-regulation, and even self-compassion.

To create a success plan, school teams can use and adapt the five steps outlined in Figure 3. These steps focus on increasing the student's feelings of acceptance, belonging, and empowerment, while also decreasing behaviors that are getting in the way of their learning and development.

We have used this approach around the country with countless school teams and students of all ages, backgrounds, and dis/abilities. We see it as the key to success for an inclusive and compassionate school environment and an innovative way of educating empathetic, community-minded problem solvers.

For a compassionate-support approach to take root, however, you will need to support your staff with the same type of grace, love, and empathy we use to support students.

In our ASCD Quick Reference Guide, *Building a Positive and Supportive Classroom* (Causton & MacLeod, 2020b), we created a number of prompts for a morning, midday, or evening reflection for educators. Here are a few examples of questions school leaders can reflect on to implement systemwide inclusive and compassionate behavioral supports:

1. What is something yesterday taught me about how I want to show up for staff and students today?

2. What is one thing I'm grateful for and/or looking forward to today?

3. Who on my staff needs an extra connection today?

4. Who are three different students who need an extra positive connection today?

5. [As difficult situations come up] What can I learn from this?

If you find yourself reacting or rushing to fix or save, ask yourself, What do I need right now? How can I learn to give and to receive help? How can I let go of the fear of disappointing people?

FIGURE 2. Strategies for Reframing Misbehavior as Stress Behavior	
Strategies to Move Toward	**Strategies to Move Away From**
Provide timely, respectful, consistent, and private feedback about expectations, rituals, routines, and rules.	Do not publicly shame students with sticker charts or point systems.
Limit sensory input and demands.	Do not overly direct, correct, or talk about what the student has done wrong or should be doing differently.
Use words sparingly and wisely.	Do not use planned isolation (detention and time-outs).
Connect by gathering as a class or community to problem solve and repair as needed.	Do not use group punishment and reward systems, including class dojos.
Share stories of success and strengths and use co-problem solving to find solutions that work for everyone.	Do not focus only on problems or write about and talk about the student in negative ways.

Compassion Is the Goal

Supporting all students in your school system with love, kindness, and compassion is an attainable goal. Using the *Ready*, *Set*, and *Success* framework, you can help your staff to embrace the foundational understanding that diversity is the norm, relationships, belonging, and inclusion are paramount for success, and "bad" behaviors are simply part of the continuum of human behaviors we all experience. You can support staff to help them stay calm during the storm and reframe challenging behavior as stress behavior. You can help students problem solve solutions for inclusion and belonging. And you can commit to supporting yourself by reflecting and responding compassionately to yourself and your staff. �

References

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FIGURE 3. Student Success Plan Process

STEP 1: Discuss strengths and talents	Sample questions: • What in the student's experience is working well at school, home, in the community? • What is working well during the student's day-to-day interactions? Be specific (ask about classes, friends, teachers, etc.). • Where and when does the student feel happiest? • What are the student's interests and talents? • What does the student want to experience more of?
STEP 2: Discuss challenges and challenging behaviors	*Sample questions*: • What in the student's experience is not working well at school, at home, in the community? • What is most challenging for the student during day-to-day interactions? Be specific (ask about classes, friends, teachers, etc.). • Where and when does the student feel angry, sad, frustrated, lonely, or hurt?
STEP 3: Consider the context from a holistic perspective (strengths, skills, needs, family, friendships, history)	*Sample questions*: • What are policies and expectations that you are attempting to enforce? • What supports are working? • What role does the classroom/school/home environment (social and physical), climate, and culture play? • Who all is involved and who does the student have strong relationships with? • What role do friends and peers play when there is success or challenges?
STEP 4: Design for increased belonging	*Sample questions*: • What supports (such as teacher, peers, academic, behavioral, social) does the student/family/team need? • How can the student's strengths help with their success? • How should the challenges identified in Step 2 be addressed? • What can be done within the environment to make the student's school, family, community experiences better? • Which friends or peers can support the student? • How can the situation be improved for everyone involved?

STEP 5: Agree on Actions	Steps to success	Person responsible	Timeline	How we'll know we are successful