10 Inclusive Swaps: Moving Beyond Praise, Rewards, and Punishment

In many classrooms, praise, rewards, and punishment have become the go-to tools for dealing with behaviors that are challenging.

But what if there's a better way — one that builds trust, emotional regulation, and genuine motivation?

These simple, inclusive swaps help you move beyond old behavior management habits and toward stronger, more connected learning communities.

Instead of...	Try this...	Why it works
Saying "Good job!" vaguely	Use Positive Descriptive Acknowledgment: "You worked hard to build that tower!"	Builds internal motivation and self-awareness.
Giving stickers for following rules	Acknowledge contributions: "You helped our classroom community by cleaning up."	Connects behavior to belonging, not bribery.

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Instead of...	Try this...	Why it works
"If you're good, you'll get a prize."	Focus on natural rewards: "Finishing work means more time for reading or projects you love."	Keeps motivation rooted in purpose, not external rewards.
Taking away recess as punishment	Use co-regulation strategies to help students reset (e.g., breathing, movement breaks).	Supports emotional regulation instead of increasing stress.
Gold stars for good behavior	Create "Acknowledgment Circles" where students notice strengths in each other.	Builds community and peer validation.
Sending a student out of the room for disruption	Stay connected through proximity, whispered check-ins, or offering a regulation break.	Preserves belonging even during challenges.
Ignoring big feelings because "they'll get over it"	Validate emotions: "It looks like you're frustrated. I'm here to help."	Strengthens emotional literacy and trust.

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Instead of...	Try this...	Why it works
Public behavior charts	Use private, relational check-ins and reflective questions.	Protects dignity and invites self-reflection.
Praising only outcomes ("You're so smart!")	Praise effort and strategy: "You tried three different ways to solve that."	Teaches growth mindset and perseverance.
Imposing consequences without conversation	Repair together: "What happened? How can we make it right?"	Focuses on relationship, responsibility, and repair — not shame.

READY TO MAKE A SHIFT?

Choose one swap to try this week — and notice how connection changes everything.

Remember: Every time we move from controlling behavior to connecting with the human behind the behavior, we are building stronger brains, stronger relationships, and stronger communities.

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GLOSSARY: KEY TERMS FOR RETHINKING BEHAVIOR SUPPORT

Behavior as Communication: Recognizing that all behavior —
even challenging behavior — is an attempt to express a feeling,
need, or stress response.

Examples:
- (PreK) Hitting as a way to express "I'm overwhelmed."
- (K-2) Running away during transitions signals anxiety.
- (3-5) Shouting during group work may signal feeling unheard.
- (Middle School) Missing class may signal social anxiety.
- (High School) Refusing an assignment may signal fear of failure.

Consequences: The natural or logical results of an action,
intended to teach responsibility rather than cause shame. Help
students connect actions to outcomes thoughtfully.

Examples:
- (PreK) A broken toy must be set aside until repaired.
- (K-2) Spilled water must be cleaned up together.
- (3-5) If a project isn't finished, the presentation is incomplete.
- (Middle School) Chromebook not charged means doing paper
  work.
- (High School) Late group project impacts the whole team's
  grade.

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Co-Regulation: An interactive process where adults lend their calm, presence, and safety to help a student manage big emotions.

Examples:
- (PreK) Sitting close and breathing slowly during a tantrum.
- (K-2) Offering a hand to squeeze during a stressful moment.
- (3-5) Silently sitting near a student who's overwhelmed.
- (Middle School) Verbalizing calm during conflict ("I'm staying calm.").
- (High School) Checking in after a heated moment with "I'm here if you want to talk."

Connection Over Compliance: Prioritizing emotional connection, safety, and trust over rigid obedience or rule-following. "(Students do well when they can, not when they fear. — Ross Greene"

Examples:
- (PreK) Comforting a crying child instead of demanding they "stop crying."
- (K-2) Checking in about feelings before correcting behavior.
- (3-5) Rebuilding trust after a misunderstanding instead of isolating the student.
- (Middle School) Discussing emotions behind a classroom conflict first.
- (High School) Offering flexible deadlines when students are overwhelmed.

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Internal Motivation: The drive to act based on internal goals, curiosity, or personal satisfaction — not for external rewards.

Examples:
- (PreK) A child keeps building a block tower to see how tall they can make it.
- (K-2) A student practices reading because they want to read to a sibling.
- (3-5) A student chooses a harder math problem because it's interesting.
- (Middle School) Volunteering to help organize a school event out of pride.
- (High School) Joining a debate team because it sparks passion.

Negative Reinforcement: Removing something unpleasant to increase the likelihood of a behavior happening again. Often confused with punishment — but it's about increasing behavior.

Examples:
- (PreK) No more reminders once toys are put away.
- (K-2) Removing an extra task after good focus during class.
- (3-5) Ending independent work early after on-task behavior.
- (Middle School) No planner checks after consistent homework.
- (High School) Exempt from a review quiz after high performance.

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Positive Descriptive Acknowledgment (PDA): A specific, grounded way to recognize a student's effort, choice, or strategy without judgment that strengthens internal motivation and emotional awareness.

Examples:
- (PreK) "You kept trying even when your block tower fell."
- (K-2) "You asked for help when the math felt tricky."
- (3-5) "You reread the paragraph carefully to find the answer."
- (Middle School) "You stayed with your group even when it was frustrating."
- (High School) "You organized your project timeline thoughtfully."

Positive Reinforcement: Adding something desirable to increase the likelihood of a behavior happening again. Positive = adding, not necessarily "good" for long-term growth.

Examples:
- (PreK) Applause after putting toys away.
- (K-2) Earning a sticker for completing morning work.
- (3-5) High five for participating in a group discussion.
- (Middle School) Shout-out on the board for team collaboration.
- (High School) Recommendation for leadership roles after showing initiative.

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Praise: Positive feedback that often focuses on outcomes rather than effort, process, or internal motivation. Overused praise can create dependence on adult approval rather than building internal self-awareness.

Examples:
- (PreK) "I love how quietly you're sitting!"
- (K-2) "Good job on your worksheet!"
- (3-5) "Nice work being the first one done!"
- (Middle School) "You're such a good student."
- (High School) "Way to get that A on your test!"

Punishment: A consequence intended to decrease a behavior's future occurrence by adding something unpleasant or removing something enjoyable. Keeping in mind that even "mild" punishments can harm trust and emotional safety.

Examples:
- (PreK) Sitting out of playtime after not listening.
- (K-2) Missing recess for talking out of turn.
- (3-5) Writing lines after running in the hallway.
- (Middle School) Lunch detention for incomplete homework.
- (High School) Saturday detention for repeated tardiness.

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Reflective Prompts: Gentle questions or comments that help students recognize, name, and understand their emotions and actions. Fosters self-awareness, emotional literacy, and thoughtful decision-making.
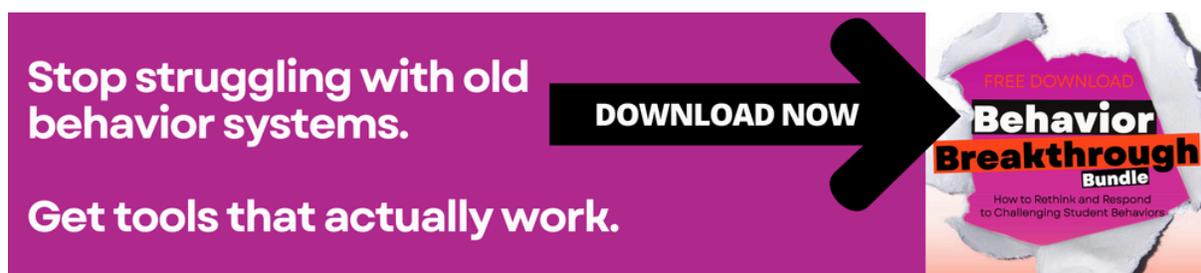
Examples:
- (PreK) "What does your face feel like when you're mad?"
- (K-2) "What helped you feel ready to join the group?"
- (3-5) "What would you like to try differently next time?"
- (Middle School) "How did your body feel when you were frustrated?"
- (High School) "What emotions came up for you during that situation?"

Rewards: External incentives (stickers, prizes, points) used to control behavior by offering something desirable.

Examples:
- (PreK) Stickers for standing in line quietly.
- (K-2) Prize box pick for getting 10 "good behavior" points.
- (3-5) Pizza party for the class with the fewest tardies.
- (Middle School) Movie day if behavior expectations are met for a month.
- (High School) Extra credit for good attendance.

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