

10 Mindset Shifts for Supporting Student Behavior

Rethinking Behavior: A Shift in Perspective



Every behavior tells a story. When students act out, shut down, or push back, they're not just being difficult—they're communicating. These moments offer insights into their experiences, emotions, and unmet needs.

By shifting our perspective from viewing behavior as a problem to seeing it as a form of communication, we can respond with empathy and effectiveness.

The following mindset shifts are designed to guide educators in interpreting behaviors constructively, fostering a more supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

1. From “They’re being defiant”➤ To “They’re signaling a need”

What looks like defiance is often a nervous system responding to overload, not a student trying to get their way. Instead of assuming a want (like attention or escape), consider whether it's a need—for regulation, clarity, connection, or relief from stress.

2. From “Fix the student”.....➤ To “Fix the environment”

Instead of asking, “What’s wrong with this student?”, ask, “What in the environment can we shift to better support them?”

3. From “They’re making bad choices”➤ To “They’re doing the best they can with the skills they have”

All behavior makes sense when we understand the full story. Students do well if they can—if they aren’t, there’s a reason.

4. From “Consequences will teach them”➤ To “Relationships are the foundation of change”

Students grow through connection, not punishment. Trusting, respectful relationships are the most powerful tool we have.

5. From “That behavior needs to stop”➤ To “What is this behavior telling us?”

Behavior is not a character flaw—it’s a form of communication. When a student acts out, they are often expressing an unmet need, emotion, or a need for support. Our role is to interpret these behaviors with empathy and seek to understand the underlying message.

6. From “They need more control”➤ To “They need more co-regulation”

Behavior challenges often reflect nervous system dysregulation. Co-regulation (calm, present adult support) helps students return to safety and engagement.

7. From “They’re not motivated”➤ To “They may be overwhelmed, afraid, or disconnected”

Lack of engagement isn’t always about motivation—it may be about trauma, anxiety, exclusion, or confusion.

8. From “Rewards and punishments work”➤ To “Belonging and safety create change”

External motivators can backfire or their impact can fade quickly. True behavior change happens when students feel safe, seen, and valued.

9. From “They just want attention”➤ To “They are seeking connection”

Connection-seeking is a healthy human impulse—not something to extinguish. Let’s give students positive ways to be noticed and valued.

10. From “This kid is a problem”➤ To “This kid is telling us there’s a problem”

Reframe the student as a messenger, not a disruption. Their behavior points us to a deeper issue in the system that may need adjusting.