Reframing Behavior

- Acknowledge and overcome the traditional "fix-the-child" mindset.

- Introduce the shift that **behavior is communication**, not defiance.
  - Behaviors are students' best available tools in that moment.
  - Even "misbehavior" is an attempt to ask for connection, control, or safety.

- Rather than pushing back—we lean in to figure out what they **need**.
  - Behaviors point us toward the unmet need beneath the surface.

How To Change The Way We Talk About, Write About, and Think About Students

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Language That Lifts: Simple Shifts for Powerful IEPs

The way we write about students directly impacts the way we offer services and support.

From progress reports to IEPs, it's essential to use words and phrases that affirm the **strengths**, **gifts**, and **talents** of all students.

Out of habit, tradition, or even unconsciously, teams discussing children who qualify for special education services in the U.S. often focus on the "roots of failure" rather than the "roots of success."

To become more inclusive, we must change our language—especially in IEPs, transition plans, and progress reports.

The transformation happens when teams shift from labels and deficit-oriented language that diminishes children's capacity to **language that lifts** and creates a new narrative about what is possible.

STRENGTH

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Session Agenda

Welcome and Opening Activities

- Chat Splash
- Mindset Before Methods
- Introductions
- Your Dashboard

Problematic Practices #1: General Praise

Problematic Practice #2: Rewards

Problematic Practice #3: Punishment

Other Solutions

- Focus on States vs. Behavior
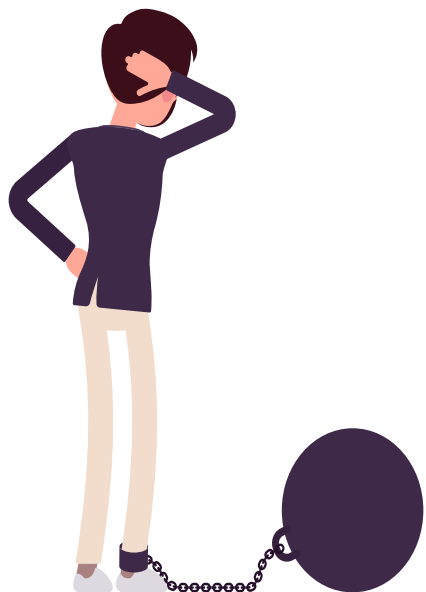- Co-Regulate when dysregulated

Closing Activities

- Closing Chat & Q&A
- By opting in...
- In a Word

Outdated and Problematic Practices #1

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

1. **Generic Praise**
2. **Public Praising as Passive Manipulation**

The Problem With General Praise

- Doesn't say *what* they did well → can't repeat it

- Focuses on outcome, not effort or process

- Builds dependence on praise instead of internal motivation

- Vague praise feels hollow / not meaningful

- Doesn't help children manage their own behavior or emotions

- Risk of kids avoiding challenges to avoid disappointing others

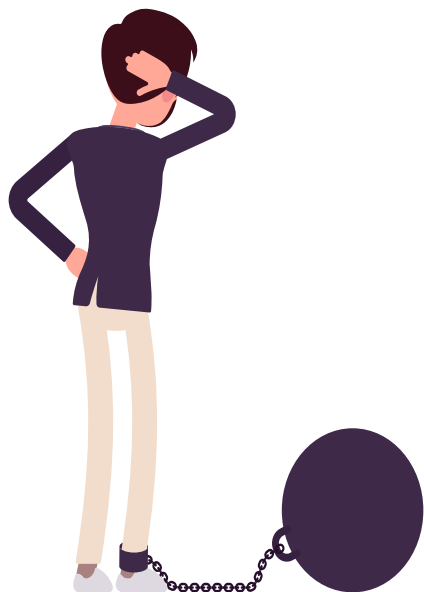# Solution - Offer PDA and PDA+

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Outdated and Problematic Practices #2

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

1. **Behavior Charts and Clips**
2. **Reward Systems (e.g., Token Economy Systems)**

The Problem with Public Behavior Charts and Clips

- Public behavior tracking systems (e.g., stoplights, clip charts, point systems) have been normalized, but **normalization ≠ effectiveness**.
- These tools were designed to increase compliance and offer "real-time feedback," yet they **often cause harm, reinforce shame, and fail to teach meaningful regulation skills**.
- Despite good intentions, these practices **can backfire and actually increase challenging behavior**.

The Harms of Public Behavior Systems

Shame and Stigma
Public tracking causes embarrassment and leads students to internalize negative labels that harm their identity and belonging.

No Instructional Value
These systems focus on behavior, not the causes or skills students need to learn.

Loss of Trust
They weaken student-teacher relationships and create disconnection.

Punishment ≠ Support
Color-coded systems may control behavior short-term but don't build regulation or autonomy.

Solution - Check the Environment Before Checking the Child

What to do: When a child shows signs of distress, disconnection, or "misbehavior," begin by examining the context around the behavior instead of jumping to assumptions about the child.

Ask:
- *Is the activity engaging and relevant?*
- *Is the space overstimulating or under-stimulating?*
- *Are there unmet sensory needs?*
- *Have transitions been clearly signaled?*

Solution - Use Private Over Public Feedback

What to do: Offer guidance and correction privately, using calm tone and body language.

This could look like:

- *Quietly crouching next to a student's desk*
- *Whispering a reminder*
- *Having a side conversation during transition time*
- *Writing a short note or signal*

Public behavior systems can isolate, label, and humiliate children. Private feedback preserves dignity and keeps the focus on growth, not embarrassment.

Solution - Ask the Child What They Need

What to do: Build solutions with students, not for them.

Ask:

- *"What's making this hard for you today?"*
- *"What would help you feel successful right now?"*
- *"How can we make this work better for you?"*

What not to do: Don't impose a solution without context. Avoid saying things like "You need to..." or "Why can't you just..." especially when the child is escalated.

Why it matters: When students co-create solutions, they're more invested and more likely to succeed. It also shifts the power dynamic—moving from control to collaboration.

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More Solutions - 9 Inclusive Ideas for Replacing Behavior Charts and Clips

Download on the dashboard

9 INCLUSIVE IDEAS FOR REPLACING BEHAVIOR CHARTS AND CLIPS

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You are a teacher because you are passionate about education and children. Sometimes, however, you will have students with behaviors that challenge you. Although it is seductive to look for quick fixes like behavior charts or using rewards and punishments. Such strategies provide very short-term compliance at best and in reality do significant harm to students. The ideas listed here are alternatives to public displays of student behavior which are designed to manage, control, and achieve compliance. These ideas are instead grounded in love, compassion, and aim to ensure everyone belongs.

IDEA 1: COMMIT TO CONNECTION OVER THE AIM OF COMPLIANCE.

Understand that behavior charts are quick fixes that do not produce long-term solutions and are likely harming students, undermining your relationships, and getting in the way of creating inclusive communities. This is a "long game" where we consider how every teaching strategy, action, and/or practice can lead to greater connection vs. compliance. For example:

- Make time to listen as students share things they are thinking about, feeling, and/or even looking forward to.
- Use a st to 5 structure to learn how students are feeling about life, about lessons, about anything at all.
- Ask open ended questions that give insight into their "inner world" of ideas, feelings, and dreams.
- Honor their diverse ideas, histories, and preferences.

Outdated and Problematic Practices #3

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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.

1. White Dominant Cultural "norms" for "good and bad" behavior
2. Negative Calls Home
3. Timeouts and Other "Well-intended" Variations (e.g., forced quiet time and breaks)
4. **Planned Ignoring**
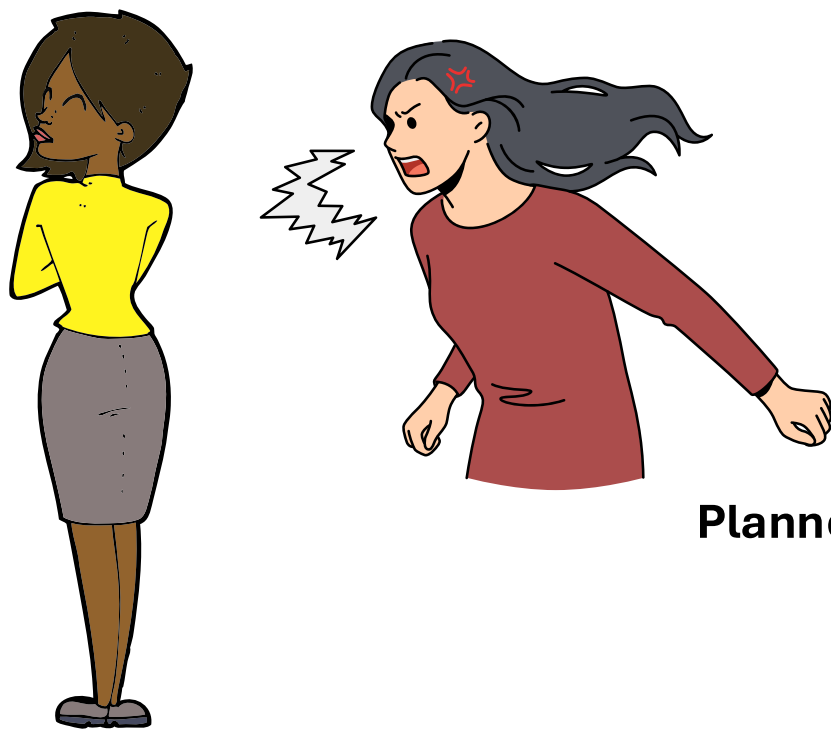5. Detention and Suspension
6. Seclusion and Exclusion
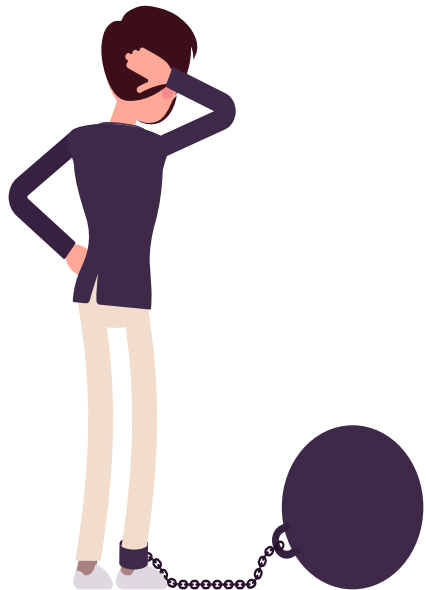
Planned Ignoring

Where adults are told to purposely withhold attention to reduce undesired behavior.

When children's bids for connection are met with silence or avoidance, they may internalize beliefs like:
- "I don't matter."
- "When I'm upset, people go away."
- "I have to be perfect to be seen."

Planned ignoring stands in direct opposition to secure attachment, the foundation of emotional well-being.

The Problem(s) with Planned Ignoring

1. **It Ignores the Child, Not Just the Behavior**
   - Children feel unseen and uncared for during distress.

2. **It Shames Emotional Expression**
   - Sends the message that big feelings are unacceptable.

3. **It Assumes Self-Regulation Without Support**
   - Ignores the need for co-regulation when a child is overwhelmed.

4. **It Misses the Message Behind Behavior**
   - Overlooks critical cues like "I need help" or "I feel unsafe."

5. **It Teaches Disconnection, Not Empathy**
   - Encourages avoidance rather than relationship-building.

6. **It's Based on Inconsistent and Ethically Flawed Research**
   - Ignores trauma and neurodiversity and can worsen behavior before improving.

Problems Continued

Planned Ignoring is still a form of punishment (though tempered by some authors and researchers who say it is a form of mild punishment).

It intentionally withholds attention — a core need for connection and co-regulation. Further Ignoring assumes a child can self-regulate in the moment. But regulation comes through co-regulation.

Many teams implement planned ignoring without clear guidelines or boundaries, risking ethical and relational harm.

Calling a behavior "attention-seeking" reduces it to manipulation, ignoring the emotional need underneath. Children begin to feel that their big feelings are unacceptable.

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Doesn't Fully Consider Trauma, Neurodiversity, or Attachment

The research base behind planned ignoring rarely considers how the strategy interacts with:

- The **trauma response** (especially for children who associate disconnection with danger or neglect)
- The needs of **neurodivergent learners** who rely on co-regulation and predictable adult responses
- The process of forming **secure attachments**, especially in early childhood

10 Things to Do When the Storm Hits

When emotions run high and things get loud,

your job isn't to fix it in the moment—it's to stay steady.

Goal? To respond with calm, clarity, and care.

✔ Before the storm: Be ready.

✔ During the storm: Anchor yourself and focus on safety.

✔ After the storm: Reflect, repair, and plan for next time.

10 Things to Do When the Storm Hits

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1. CALM FIRST, TEACH LATER

Observe where a student is struggling or disengaging. Determine whether the task is too easy, too difficult, or misaligned with their needs.

2. COLLECT YOURSELF BEFORE YOU REACT

One breath. One pause. Your calm helps them calm.

3. MOVE SLOWLY, SPEAK SOFTLY

Observe where a student is struggling or disengaging. Determine whether the task is too easy, too difficult, or misaligned with their needs.

4. STAY STEADY: BE THE CALM ANCHOR

Stay neutral, steady, and predictable—even if things feel chaotic.

5. PRIORITIZE SAFETY, NOT SPEED

Get others safe. Don't rush to consequences or solutions mid-crisis.

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