



## Chapter 1

# A Case for Change

**W**hat's wrong with kids today? "What happened to the good old days when students behaved themselves in school?" "I didn't sign up for this when I decided to become a teacher!" "These kids with behavior problems should just be suspended!" "Punishment worked on me and works for me!"

As behavior specialists working in the public school system, we hear similar questions from and attitudes expressed by educators almost every day. Educators are facing immense difficulties as the number of students with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges increases dramatically while at the same time public education is more closely monitored and held accountable for high academic outcomes, especially since passage of No Child Left Behind in 2002. Our training to be educators did not adequately expose us or prepare us to deal with these difficulties, and our guess is that yours didn't either, or you would not be reading this book. In fact, teachers in both general and special education have repeatedly identified behavior management as a priority in-service need, and student behavior has been in the top five teacher concerns in Gallup polls for the past thirty years. Our sincere hope is that by reading this book and applying its concepts with the students you teach, you will find behavior management less overwhelming and your confidence and belief that you can meet these challenges will greatly increase. Let's start by addressing each of these common questions and attitudes set out in the first paragraph of the chapter.





## What's Wrong with Kids Today?

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There is no doubt that increasing numbers of students in public schools have behavior challenges. Between 1976 and 2004, the number of students between the ages of three and twenty-one served in the emotional disturbance category doubled from 283,000 to 489,000.<sup>1</sup> The number of students served under the educational autism category, who also often experience behavioral challenges, has also increased dramatically—according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, from 22,664 to 211,610 between 1994 and 2006.<sup>2</sup> In addition, many students receiving special education services under other eligibility categories such as other health impairments and learning disabilities, as well as students in general education, also exhibit challenging behaviors. It is no wonder that educators are overwhelmed. In fact, according to one survey, students with emotional and behavioral challenges are the primary reason that general educators leave the profession.<sup>3</sup> If you are feeling frustrated in your efforts to reach and teach students with behavioral challenges, you are certainly not alone.

## What Happened to the Good Old Days?

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Our response to this question is always, “How good were those days *really*?” First, where were many children with significant behavioral challenges, especially those with multiple, severe, or misunderstood disabilities if they were not in public schools? The honest answer is that they were at home with minimal learning experiences or interaction with others, either because parents did not send them to school or schools kicked them out, or they were residing in underfunded and understaffed institutions too often receiving poor care and being subjected to abuse and/or neglect. The closing of many institutions in the late 1970s and early 1980s and passage of federal legislation such as the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act of 1980 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 ended these widespread practices. Now, every child, even those with the most severe limitations, has the right to a free and appropriate public education and dignity and respect for all individuals is now highly valued and modeled.

Second, adults no longer model submissiveness and obedience, and this is a good thing. One of the largest influences on our behavior management philosophy is the book *Positive Discipline* by Jane Nelson, which discusses how various historical events such as the women’s and civil rights movements led people to question and challenge government and authority in general and not just submissively accept the direction of those in power.<sup>4</sup> Children see these attitudes and behaviors modeled and also challenge authority, including teachers and administrators. They want a rationale for their curriculum, question the decisions of school personnel, and test boundaries, which drives those of us who grew up in the “because I said so” and “children should be seen and not heard” era crazy. But is challenging authority and holding leaders accountable a bad thing if we teach students to do so respectfully? Is this not a life skill we value in the current culture of transparency and accountability for those in authority? Whose behavior needs to change?





Nelson sets out three main approaches of adult-child interaction. The first is strictness, a punitive approach characterized by excessive adult control, no choices by the child, and the attitude of “You do it because I said so.” This often leads to rebellion on the part of the child, who avoids or attempts to manipulate adults to get what he or she wants. Children do not learn why it isn’t in their best interest to do something or not do something, only that they may be punished if they do not comply with adult directions, so they often end up making poor choices when the punishing adult is not present. The second approach is permissiveness, the exact opposite of strictness. Adults who are permissive with children fail to set limits, giving them complete freedom to do anything they want, which often leads to an attitude of entitlement and lack of personal responsibility for choices. The third approach, positive discipline, results in the most productive outcomes of responsibility and life skill development, the ultimate goal of public education. In this approach, adults are kind but firm, providing choices within appropriate limits based on mutual respect.

## **I Didn’t Sign Up for This!**

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Educators we work with often express the belief that their job is solely to teach academic skills and that teaching behavioral skills is not their responsibility. However, research clearly shows a co-occurrence between academic and behavioral problems. Although the direction of this relationship is not clear, it appears complex and influenced by a variety of factors.<sup>5</sup> What we do know is that as social and behavioral skills improve, academic achievement also increases.<sup>6</sup> Preventive behavior management is one of best academic instructional support strategies and vice versa.<sup>7</sup>

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In addition to teaching academic skills, the purpose of public schools is to help young people develop into productive, contributing members of society. Individuals with poor social and behavioral skills are at risk for a wide range of problems that have a negative impact on society: school dropout, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, gang membership, low self-esteem, social maladjustment, medical problems, employment difficulties, aggression, delinquency, incarceration, higher death and injury rates, and lifelong dependency on the welfare system.<sup>8</sup> Social skills deficiency in childhood, in fact, is the single best predictor of significant problems in adulthood.<sup>9</sup>

Teachers have long identified behavioral management as an area where they need more training and support in order to increase their efficiency. National surveys of topics that are considered of great importance by general educators consistently identify discipline and safety as a high priority. Clearly behavior management is part of every teacher’s job. (You actually did sign up for this; you just didn’t know it.) Fortunately, good teachers have the skills they need to teach behavioral and social skills because social and academic behavior is governed by the same principles of learning and responds to the same types of intervention.<sup>10</sup>





Just as some students have reading difficulties, some students have difficulty selecting and using the appropriate social and behavioral skills. The difference is that traditionally academic instruction has been proactive, while behavioral instruction has been reactive.<sup>11</sup> Teachers would never test a student on long division before teaching him or her how to do it, but many times they “test” students on behavioral skills before teaching them. For example, teachers often hold students accountable for knowing how to get attention or help appropriately in the classroom before ever directly teaching this skill. Because many students seemingly teach themselves social and behavioral skills through observing the behaviors of those around them, educators tend to expect all students to do this. The problem with this expectation is that some students may not be exposed to appropriate models prior to and outside public education, and some may have disabilities that interfere with this learning process.

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## Students with Behavior Problems Should Just Be Suspended!

For many students with chronic behavior problems, suspension is not the meaningful consequence it is intended to be and often does not result in the student’s changing his or her behavior for the better upon return to school. Many students do not want to be in school, which for them is synonymous with rejection and failure; for them, suspension is actually reinforcing the problem behavior. The reality is that many times, students are not adequately supervised outside school and therefore spend their time engaging in their preferred activities such as watching television or playing video games. Time away from the educational environment certainly does not facilitate the progress of at-risk students who are already academically and socially disengaged from school. When they return, they’ve missed even more instruction and have fallen further behind academically. These kids, viewed as troublemakers, certainly are not the ones their peers typically want to hang out with—unless they are other at-risk students in search of a peer group.

Many administrators we work with say that parents of other students in their school complain and put pressure on them to suspend students with behavior problems so that their child’s learning environment is not disrupted. “My child’s education should not suffer and he shouldn’t have to put up with that” is a common opinion we hear. The fact is that schools using only punishment strategies such as suspension have increased rates of vandalism, aggression, truancy, and school dropout, which actually promote antisocial behavior.<sup>12</sup> These same parents complain when these type of problems increase in their neighborhood. In addition, part of preparing students for real life is exposing them to and



teaching them to deal with all of the problems they will eventually face in society, including peers who exhibit challenging behavior.

Even if suspension is a meaningful and undesirable consequence for a student with behavior challenges, it still may not be an appropriate intervention. Although it may in some cases decrease an undesirable behavior, it does not teach a more appropriate behavioral response. The student may learn to fear or dislike the person giving the punishment (educators) and the place associated with it (school), certainly not the intended outcome. So in actuality, suspension does little more than provide educators with temporary relief from an uncomfortable and frustrating situation. This may be needed at times, but then it should be called what it is—a break for the school staff—and not be considered effective behavior management. In fact, “there is currently no evidence that suggests suspension or expulsion changes the behavior of difficult students. Rather, for troublesome or at-risk students, the most well-documented outcome of suspension appears to be further suspension and eventually school drop-out.”<sup>13</sup>

Clearly suspension is not supported by common sense or research, and in an era of mandated evidence-based practices, it should be used sparingly.

## Punishment Works for Me!

We know what you are thinking: “But kids shouldn’t be this way.” “I’m already overwhelmed, overworked, and underpaid.” “My punitive behavior management practices have worked well for me for [fill in the blank] years.” We hear you.



### Kaye Says . . .

I come from a long line of educators who firmly believed in the traditional “don’t smile until Christmas” philosophy and had a low tolerance for any inappropriate behavior, which they typically responded to with a punitive discipline approach. I started my career with that belief also, and in the small rural Nebraska town where I grew up and in my early teaching experiences in schools without many students with chronic behavior challenges, that approach did suppress problem behavior. Therefore, I mistakenly believed it was effective—just as many of you do.

The truth is that punitive approaches will work for about 80 to 90 percent of the student population as far as controlling behavior. But they do not develop personal responsibility or teach life skills and simply do not work for students at risk for or those who already have chronic behavioral challenges.



## What Can We Do?

So far we have pointed out that increasing numbers of students exhibit chronic behavioral challenges in schools, behavior management is an important part of every educator's job, and traditional punitive approaches to behavior management that many educators typically use and are comfortable with, such as suspension, don't work in the long run. The situation may appear hopeless, but it isn't. Here is what you can do as a start.

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## Remove the Words *Should* and *Shouldn't* from Your Vocabulary

"Parents should teach their kids how to behave." "Students shouldn't be this way." "This shouldn't be part of my job." Guess what? Many times parents don't teach their kids how to behave, students are how they are, and it *is* part of your job. Period. We hate to be so blunt, but frankly if you can't let this go, we suggest you start looking through the want ads because it isn't going to change any time soon.



## Limit the Time Spent "Admiring the Problem"

Many times when we are called to be a part of a problem-solving session for a student with chronic behavioral challenges, we start by staying quiet, listening, and watching the time. We hear comments from our fellow educators like, "This is so sad," "My heart breaks for this kid," and "I just want to take him [or her] home with me." Although there is a valid need to vent and dealing with these issues can be emotionally difficult, too many times, thirty to forty-five minutes or more go by with no conversation focusing on what to do about it. If we are really so short on time, we need to use it wisely, focusing more time on problem solving than problem admiring.

## Strive to Understand the Perspectives of All Team Members and Stakeholders

We truly believe that a vast majority of parents sincerely care about their children and want what is best for them and that a vast majority of all educators entered the profession to help students learn and become productive and contributing members of society. Remember this when conflict arises. We all have the same goals; we just have different ideas about the best way to get there and different variables influencing our attitudes and behaviors



as adults. We need to understand everyone's perspective and work together to meet the needs of teaching students with behavior challenges. We have worked with several parents who were challenging the district, calling in advocates, and threatening legal action. These moves certainly can be intimidating. When we took the time to get to know the parent, listen to and validate their concerns and build a positive relationship with them, these situations often resolved themselves.



### **Jodie Says . . .**

One particular parent I recall was especially intimidating. She pretty much had the superintendent on speed-dial, wrote frequent letters to the editor regarding services in the schools, and generally struck fear in the hearts of school personnel. In one of our first meetings planning for the education of her child, the conversation was heated and combative. In a tense moment, I interjected, "I know I am the newest member of your child's team, but as the person who is going to teach your child every day, I want to tell you I admire you for advocating for your child. Many parents don't get involved in their child's education. Parents are such valuable members of the team because you know your child better than any of us. I want you to know that our goals are the same. We both want your child to be successful at school. We may not always agree with how to do that, but I am optimistic that we can work together to benefit your child." The conversation stopped momentarily, and when it resumed, it was more collaborative and less combative.

After the meeting, the parent stopped me and told me that no one from the schools had ever acknowledged her advocacy as a good thing and said she really looked forward to working with me. After that, we had a positive, working relationship, and we could problem-solve, compromise, and even agree to disagree. Our collaboration definitely benefited her child.

## **Let Go of the Old Way of Doing Things**

Traditional punitive approaches to behavior management do not result in the intended outcomes and need to change. As Einstein once wisely said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."



## Expand Your Behavior Management Toolbox

Abraham Maslow once stated: “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail.” However, every behavior problem is not a nail. Many of these problems have varied and complex causes. As educators, we need to increase the number of tools in our intervention toolbox because different types of problems have different types of solutions. A growing body of research is showing that alternatives to punitive practices have decreased inappropriate behavior and increased both social skills and academic achievement in many school districts. As a whole, educators need to shift their behavior management paradigm from focusing on punishment to focusing on prevention and early intervention.

Welcome to the world of positive behavior support and functional behavioral assessment. We spent a great deal of time and money learning how to implement these principles in public school settings. Let us give you the quick and cheap training in this book. With the right attitude, it can be a lot of fun and can lead to amazing progress in your students. We promise.

## Key Points to Remember

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- The number of students with challenging behaviors in our schools is on the rise.
- Our society promotes an attitude of scrutiny. Students today are more likely than in the past to challenge authority and question school staff.
- Traditional reactive and punitive interventions for behavior do not develop personal responsibility or teach life skills to any student and do not work with students who present chronic behavior challenges.
- Schools must work collaboratively with parents, teachers, specialists, and the administration to design positive preventive approaches to manage challenging behaviors.
- Teachers need to be provided with more information and training on effective programming for students with challenging behaviors.
- Prevention and early intervention are essential components of positive, effective behavior management for students with challenging behavior.

## Discussion Questions

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1. We all have had students in our classrooms who have challenging behaviors. What are some of the behaviors that they exhibit that make it difficult to teach them? What are some ways we can directly teach these students the behavioral skills they lack?



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2. Suspension is one of the most frequently used behavioral consequences in schools today even though research says that it is not effective with at-risk students and students with chronic behavioral problems. Nevertheless, schools do need to address aggressive and dangerous behaviors, and they have an obligation to keep all students safe. How can we address these serious behaviors, ensure student safety, and make consequences meaningful to students with challenging behaviors? What alternatives to suspension might work in your school?
  3. Parents are important members of student educational teams. What are some barriers to a positive relationship between teachers and the parents of students with challenging behaviors? What are some techniques and approaches you can use with a combative parent? What are some ways you could get an uninvolved parent more involved?