

E-4 Assess causes of misbehavior to tailor your response

How do I tailor my response to address individual causes of misbehavior?

When your initial plans for behavior management are not sufficient to address student behavior effectively, reflect on the root causes of misbehavior and determine appropriate solutions. Note that the most effective teachers proactively engage in this type of reflection on a consistent, ongoing basis.

- **Consider the charts below to identify different causes of and solutions for misbehavior**
- **Review different tools to help structure your reflection about student misbehavior (found in the E-4 Tools tab of www.teachingasleadership.org)**
 - Reflecting on Misbehavior and Planning your Response Template
 - Questions to Consider When Consequences Don't Work
- **When refining your approach to misbehavior, remember that effective long-term solutions to misbehavior are:**
 - student-centered
 - designed to address the underlying cause
 - based on the firm belief that all students are capable of appropriate behavior.
 - focused on recognizing behavioral improvement over time (even when gradual).

What are potential solutions to different causes of misbehavior?

Cause	What does this look like?	A teacher's typical reaction	The student's legitimate need	Solution
Attention Seeking	Constantly waving their hands to participate, whining for help, or entertaining the class	Mild. We feel irritated and annoyed. Typically, we acquiesce and give them the attention they want (even if it's negative attention), and they stop—for a while.	Students need to feel valued and affirmed. In younger grades, students may crave an adult's attention, whereas an older student's target audience may be peers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show students appropriate ways to gain attention ("Benvolio, let's come up with a special signal that you can use to show me you would like my attention.") • provide selective attention to reinforce good behavior ("Thanks for cleaning up, Puck, because that really saves me time.") • Set up times to give students your attention ("Helena, I'd love to hear more about your weekend during a lunch date tomorrow.")

Cause	What does this look like?	A teacher's typical reaction	The student's legitimate need	Solution
Power Seeking	Students who verbalize or suggest with body language, "I won't do what you say! You can't make me!"	Hot. We feel angry, frustrated and fearful of losing control. Our natural inclination may be to fight with the student (and, in so doing, engage in an unproductive struggle for power ourselves), or give up	Students need to feel in control, autonomous and free to be individuals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow voice and choice ("Propose some alternatives to the assignment after class, Beatrice, and we can talk through them.") • Delegate responsibility ("Iago, will you help operate the audiovisual equipment for the class today?") Read more about classroom jobs • Acknowledge legitimate power ("You're right, Cordelia. I can't force you to do anything you don't want to. But you will have to accept the consequences of your decision.") • provide consistent rationale for items throughout your class (for rules, procedures, instruction)
Revenge Seeking	Attacking you or others verbally or physically, or vandalizing school property	Boiling. We feel hurt, disappointment or even dislike toward the child. Our gut response may lead us to lash back at them or punish them harshly, thereby exerting revenge on them ourselves!	Children need an outlet for feelings of hurt, and they may want to protect themselves from future pain.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build caring relationships ("Claudio, what's really upsetting you?") • Teach appropriate expression of feelings through the use of puppet shows or drawings, as well as I-statements, community meetings and problem-solving protocols ("In today's journal assignment, we're going to spend a few minutes writing about a time when we were really angry at someone.") • issue consequences in private ("Hamlet, we'll talk about this after class so we don't waste everyone's learning time"). • focus on the behavior, not the child (uphold student dignity in response) • acknowledge positive contributions from every child • Allow students to save face by ignoring a rebellious mutter like "I'm leaving when the bell rings" rather than replying, "Oh no, you're not!" • Take charge of our own negative emotions ("Class, I wanted to apologize for raising my voice yesterday. That is no way to resolve a problem.")

Cause	What does this look like?	A teacher's typical reaction	The student's legitimate need	Solution
Avoidance of Failure	Procrastinating or not finishing work. Regularly asking to visit the nurse or bathroom.	We feel professional concern, despair and self-doubt about our abilities to reach the student. Our natural response may be to feel like a failure ourselves, giving up or referring the child to a counselor who we hope will "fix" the problem.	They don't think they can live up to your expectations. They don't want to be seen as unsuccessful.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use student-centered tracking system to show students that hard work has previously resulted in success ("Gertrude, look at your portfolio and see the progress you've made in punctuation with your careful practice!") Read more about building students' "I Can" • scaffold assignments from easy-to-hard • Foster friendships and build confidence ("Oberon, will you please quietly explain the Do Now procedure to Titania while the rest of us begin?") • Lower the stress level ("We're going to practice our presentations with a partner before doing it in front of the class.")

Additional solutions to common causes of misbehavior

Cause	Solution
Sense of powerlessness Students' frustration over lack of fairness and/or influence on a situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explain rationale behind rules and consequences • respond to misbehavior fairly and consistently
Unclear Limits For general or lesson-specific behavioral expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be explicit and consistent with teaching and reinforcing expectations, • solicit help from student influencers (friends, families, etc.)
Boredom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plan lessons so that all students are actively engaging with the content • develop students' value for learning academic content (I-2) • meet students at the intersection of challenge and ability (P-4) • incorporate student interests into your lesson planning
Inability to Express Feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach appropriate expression of feelings through the use of puppet shows or drawings, as well as I-statements, community meetings and problem-solving protocols ("In today's journal assignment, we're going to spend a few minutes writing about a time when we were really angry at someone.") • teach students how to resolve conflicts appropriately

Cause	Solution
Peer Pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop students' rational understanding that they can achieve by working hard (I-1), and that they will benefit by doing so (I-2) • expose students to others (classmates, community members, historical figures) who are role models (I-5)
Behavior Disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complete a behavior contract • seek assistance from your school's SpEd team • read more about differentiating plans for student behavior

Serious, external factors that can cause student misbehavior

In many cases, you will be able to affect the causes of misbehavior through adjusting your lessons, consistently and respectfully upholding reasonable limits, helping students express their feelings appropriately, or supporting improved behavior in a more formalized way. However, there are some rare situations or phenomena that are simply beyond your immediate control, or perhaps even your immediate understanding.

You may be teaching students for whom violence has been a tragic and deeply affecting part of their lives. Childhood trauma includes experiences that go beyond normal life stressors; these experiences can be physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; neglect; parental alcohol or drug abuse; death in the family; witnessing violence; frequent changes in primary caregivers; and physical injury. (As explained in the *Teaching As Leadership* text, some corps members do deal with students who have been diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of the violence they have witnessed or experienced.) As a classroom teacher, it is important to be aware of what behavior problems could be manifestations of trauma:

- **Hurting others without seeming to care** can be a sign of overwhelming pain and suffering on the part of the misbehaving student. Children and youth who have suffered serious pain can shut down their feelings and lose touch with their sense of empathy.
- **Aggressiveness beyond what is typical** in the students you teach is highly correlated with being victimized by abuse or witnessing the abuse of another family member.
- **Deliberately annoying others** can be a sign of a student's sense of helplessness, also common when a student is accustomed to being abused or neglected.
- **Hypervigilance**, or a tendency to always be on the lookout for potential dangers, can also be a sign of exposure to an unexpected traumatic event.
- **Jumpiness or hyperactivity** can be a sign of trauma, as well as a sign of a disorder such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).
- Finally, **unusual spaciness** can be a sign both of a physical disorder, as well as a detached state resulting from being overwhelmed by a traumatic experience.

However, it is important not to assume that an unusually spacey student has experienced a traumatic incident – they might be distracted by the upcoming school dance. An aggressive child simply might require help channeling her energy and strength, and a child who exhibits annoying behavior might need more positive reinforcement for good behavior. We do not give these examples to minimize your vigilance, but only to remind you to analyze student's behaviors critically. And, although many students bring symptoms of the stress of their world to the classroom, this does not mean that these students cannot achieve academically or behave appropriately in your classroom.

There are many things you can do to have a profound, positive impact on a child who is a victim of trauma without devoting your full attention to that student or assuming the role of a therapist. Traumatized children, perhaps more than other students, benefit from structure, routines, positive empowerment, and positive attention – all practices you should be implementing as an effective classroom teacher regardless of who fills your class. You have the opportunity and responsibility to provide all of your students with an environment that is safe, and in which they can experience success.

That said, some students would benefit from attention and intervention beyond the scope of what you can provide as a classroom teacher, and childhood trauma is one cause of student misbehavior that requires extra attention. If you have attempted to handle a particular student's misbehavior with consistency, persistence, reflection and revised strategies, and the behavior persists, perhaps something else in the life of that student must be addressed. Set up a meeting with the student and the school counselor. If journal entries, bruises, welts, cuts, or statements made by the child lead you to suspect that he or she has been a victim of trauma and/or abuse, or is currently being victimized, it may be your *legal obligation* to seek outside intervention, perhaps with the help of the school counselor, nurse, or principal. Available resources will depend upon your school and community and will likely not be as readily available as you would hope. However, they exist. Reach out in your region to determine the proper resources and outlets at your disposal. As a classroom teacher who sees your students regularly, you may be the school representative best positioned to observe the signs of distress, and you can do a great service to students by helping them access the support and services they need.

How should I differentiate my approach to students with behavior disabilities?

Some students, particularly some students with behavior-related disabilities, will need more formalized support in learning to manage their behavior. Individual [behavior contracts](#) allow you to construct a specific set of expectations, consequences, and rewards for students with whom the regular classroom system is not working. Consider the reflection of Sara Cotner (South Louisiana '00):

One of my third grade students had bi-polar disorder and was notorious for destructive and disrespectful behavior the year before she entered my class. Her behavior was so severe, in fact, that she had to be institutionalized for several weeks at a time. I introduced an individualized behavior modification plan. It was a simple table with our daily schedule, and she earned stars in the boxes for good behavior. If she misbehaved, I would record the behavior exactly, and her grandmother signed the sheet each night. The student would receive a certificate for earning a certain number of stars in a day. When she collected enough certificates, she could trade them in for time on the computer. After three weeks of this individualized system, she no longer needed it. She responded very favorably to the class-wide positive reinforcement system.

In some cases, you will need to access additional help from one or more of your fellow teachers or administrators. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that for any student who needs extra behavioral support, the IEP team (those who help create and monitor a student's Individualized Education Plan) must conduct a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) as well. An FBA involves a school-based team implementing a behavior intervention plan that includes positive behavioral interventions and supports for a student with behavior disabilities.

The underlying assumption of the FBA is that every behavior is serving a function, whether it's to get attention, escape tasks, obtain objects, alleviate boredom, or any number of purposes. A comprehensive assessment of a student's behavior and the social, emotional, cognitive, and environmental factors associated with the behavior should reveal the behavior's function. While the FBA process can be done in a variety of ways, the following example presents a simplified version of the four steps usually involved in the process:

1. **Clearly define the problem behaviors(s):** Jason gets out of his desk and walks around the room. While walking around the room, he often taps on other students' desks.
2. **Identify events, times, settings, and situations that predict when the behaviors *will* and *will not* occur:** Jason does this in social studies, language arts, and science. He does not do this in math, art, or health.
3. **Gather data on possible causes of misbehavior (What is the student “getting” out of misbehaving? What the function of the misbehavior?):** After several observations and interviews with Jason, his teachers, and his parents, it seems that the function of the misbehavior is task avoidance. He seems to exhibit the behavior most frequently when asked to do something that involves writing.
4. **Develop and test a hypothesis:** The hypothesis is that Jason has difficulty with writing and misbehaves as a way to avoid it. To test the hypothesis, his teachers planned activities that did not involve writing and observed and charted Jason's behavior for a couple days. He did not get out of his seat and walk around the room. To be sure their hypothesis was correct, they then incorporated writing back into their plans and observed that the misbehavior started again.

One outcome of an FBA is an understanding of why a student misbehaves, but the more important outcome should be a behavior intervention plan developed specifically for the student; one that is based on the results of the FBA. In Jason's case, a plan was developed that included individualizing his writing assignments, teaching him how to ask for help when he needed it, allowing him to use a computer for longer writing assignments, giving him the opportunity to take breaks during writing assignments, and a contract that included rewards for staying in his seat and consequences for getting out of his seat. Function-based behavior support allows teachers to individualize, or differentiate, based on a particular student's needs. The behavior intervention plan should include positive strategies and, in many cases, skill-building interventions. Sometimes students do not have the appropriate *skills* to exhibit appropriate behavior in some contexts, so these skills must be *taught*.

The plan may also involve changes in the student's routine; when a student's problem behavior is predictable, changes in the student's routine can make it less likely that the problem behavior will occur. For example, Moninda blurts out a lot during class, especially in her afternoon classes. Since she takes medication for ADHD, her teachers meet with her parents to find out if there have been changes in her medical treatment. Her parents inform you that she no longer takes her medication because it was making her tired. As a solution, her parents may want to take her back to her physician, but they may not. The solution may be as simple as a schedule change where Moninda takes her academic subjects in the morning and PE, art, and life skills in the afternoon. Once the plan is in place, it is very important for the team to monitor, evaluate, and adjust as necessary.