

# Understanding the Complexity of Student Behavior: An Empathetic Approach

## Considering Behavior Complexity

When considering behaviors of concern, educators often focus on overt events that cause classroom disruptions, such as physical and verbal aggression or disrespect towards peers and teachers. However, educators must also be mindful of subtler signs of struggle such as withdrawal, excessive silence, inability to focus, or chronic absenteeism. Behavior must be understood as a complex interplay of actions, responses, emotions, and social interactions. While the more noticeable external behaviors indeed pose challenges within the school setting, internalized experiences such as anxiety, difficulties in social skills, or other coping responses to external pressures, warrant equal attention.

Educating students who exhibit behaviors of concern requires an informed, compassionate, and holistic approach. By recognizing the complexity of students' internal experiences, conducting universal screenings, identifying behaviors of concern, and providing appropriate interventions and accommodations, schools can help all students thrive.

### Examples of Internalizing Behaviors in the Classroom

Anxiety and avoidance	A student navigating internalized anxiety may display behaviors such as avoiding participation in class discussions, sitting quietly in the back of the classroom, or appearing overly anxious or tense during exams or presentations.
Perfectionism	A student with internalized perfectionism may excessively self-criticize their work, striving for unattainable standards of perfection. They may spend excessive time on assignments, struggle to submit work on time, or become easily discouraged by minor mistakes.
Social withdrawal	Students who are navigating internalized feelings of social inadequacy may isolate themselves from their peers. They may sit alone during lunch breaks, avoid group activities, or show reluctance in initiating conversations or forming new friendships.
Low self-esteem	Students navigating internalized low self-esteem may display self-deprecating behaviors in the classroom. Students may underestimate their abilities, doubt their academic performance, or feel unworthy of recognition or praise. They may be hesitant to ask questions or seek help from teachers.
Self-imposed pressure	Some students may be navigating internalized external pressures, such as parental expectations or the desire to succeed academically. They may exhibit behaviors like excessive self-criticism, overloading themselves with extracurricular activities or coursework, or becoming overly stressed about grades.
Learned helplessness	Students who are navigating an internalized sense of learned helplessness may believe that their efforts are futile and that they have little control over their academic outcomes. They may exhibit passivity, lack of motivation, or become disengaged from learning activities.

## *Understanding the Complexity of Student Behavior: An Empathetic Approach*

It is critical to understand that students' internal experiences and behaviors are complex and individual. Schools can support students by promoting an inclusive climate, offering opportunities for self-reflection, and providing appropriate interventions.

### **Recognizing Behaviors of Concern in the School Environment**

Adopting a holistic approach to behavior is crucial. Remember, behavior is communication, especially for students experiencing disabilities. Behaviors of concern in the school environment can be a signal that a student is struggling with an aspect of their learning environment, such as the curriculum, social dynamics, or even the physical environment itself. A student refusing to participate in a group activity, for instance, may be an expression of difficulty with social interaction, rather than the child being defiant. Moreover, some behaviors are intrinsically linked to a student's disability. An apparent noncompliant student who experiences ADHD might be struggling with impulse control, while an autistic student might be overwhelmed by the classroom's sensory stimuli.

In exploring student behavior to consider potential underlying causes, educators should display curiosity, empathy, and patience. Our goal should be to understand why behaviors of concern are occurring and provide appropriate support, rather than merely penalizing unwanted behavior. For example, a student with ADHD might benefit from frequent breaks or specific seating arrangements, while a student with sensory overload might need a quiet space for calming down.

### **Connection to 'Big' Behavior**

It's important to note that many of the more noticeable or disruptive behaviors we observe in schools often serve as outward manifestations of internal struggles. These 'big' behaviors can be expressions of various internalizing issues, such as anxiety, depression, trauma, or stress. Understanding this connection can provide valuable insights into the root causes of these behaviors and guide us in developing more effective and empathetic responses. By addressing these underlying issues, we can not only reduce instances of 'big' behavior but also better support our students' overall well-being. This holistic approach is a vital part of our commitment to creating a positive and supportive school environment.

#### ***Key Takeaway: Approach Behavior with Empathy and Understanding***

Ultimately, we should shift our perspective from merely managing student behavior to understanding it, and tailor interventions that best support each student's needs. This empathetic and proactive approach can transform the educational experience, promoting a more inclusive and successful learning environment. Let's strive to see beyond surface behavior and uncover the hidden messages, creating an educational environment where every student feels understood and supported.