CHAPTER

1

Understanding What's Behind the Behavior

Why Kids Act Out and Punitive Punishment Doesn't Work

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

"Traditional discipline works with the kids that need it the least, but it works the least with the kids that need it the most."

—Dr. Lori Desautels

Seek to Understand: The Reason Underneath the Pattern

Every school I go to, I always hear about their most challenging student. I get the multiyear stories and hear about the significant efforts that are made to help this specific student. I see the pain

on the faces of the educators looking for answers. They want to receive the "magic wand" strategy that will change everything and reveal what they might have missed. This is what the educators were looking for with Waya.

Waya was in fourth grade, and every morning at drop off, he was escorted by two adults from his parents' car to his "classroom." His classroom was a padded de-escalation room. The educators explained that this room was necessary and part of his individualized plan due to Waya's intense outbursts, multiple elopement attempts per day, and inability to be around others.

The school served students from two competing Native American tribes cohabiting on the same reservation. While supporting the school, I would stay at a casino on the reservation, and one time asked the hotel's employees a few questions. The crime and violence they described on the reservation far surpassed anything I heard about—even compared to some of the top rated "violent" cities that I've worked in. "Why do the two tribes stay on the same reservation even when they don't get along?" I asked.

The lady smiled and chuckled, "That's the way it is. What do you mean?"

So, when the school explained that Waya and his family lived off the grid for several years, I could understand their motivation. I also understood that Waya was not operating off the same set of expectations as other kids on the reservation. Opportunistic and cunning, Waya tried to escape every time they brought his lunch each day. As we stood outside his padded classroom, the educator first warned me, "If you even crack this door a little. He will run, and we will spend so much time just trying to get him. Talk to him through the door." I peeked through the small sliver of the reinforced plastic window on the door. Waya stood in the corner with a blank look on his face, waiting to see what would happen.

"Hey, do you care if I hang out in there with you?" I asked. Waya nodded. As the educator unlocked the door, she explained how I would need to turn my body sideways to squeeze inside. I did as instructed, entering at an angle that blocked the door. After one minute in the room, I could tell why Waya was eloping at every chance. The room was small, maybe 8-by-8 feet, lined with nothing but blue padding so he could scream and punch the walls without hurting his hands. I felt disgust and rage standing in that room. I couldn't imagine what this fourth-grade "off-the-grid" child must have been feeling, so I asked. Waya said that he liked the school, but he didn't like the other students in his class. He also hated being in this room, which he had been in most of the year.

At that time, a group of high school mentors came in to work with Waya. I watched their interactions and how Waya lit up as much as the high school mentor. I saw joy between them, subdued by the heaviness of their learning environment.

I knocked on the window to leave the room and process my observations. My first question was, "I want to take him out of this room. Could we try something for 30 minutes?" I saw immediate panic on both of the educators' faces as they quickly rattled off stories of how he had run away at every opportunity. I decided to model to them the power of mutually co-constructed rewards with clear, high expectations. After checking with the assistant principal, I was given the green light to try the intervention.

When the high school mentors left, I went back into the room with Waya for lunch. We sat in the room together to eat and talk. As we ate, he explained how he preferred working with older kids rather than his classmates. I said, "You did amazing with the mentor, and I know you said you want to get out of this room. Want to come up with a plan to do that?" A crooked smile slowly crept across his face as he stopped twirling his mashed potatoes.

I continued, “We can get out of here, but we have to convince the teachers that you won’t run away.” He then stopped smiling, and his body language became less animated. I continued, “The thing is, Waya, if we say we aren’t going to run away, but then we do, they might not trust you as quickly next time. I’m only here for two more days, and I’d love to help you not be in this room anymore.”

Waya and I then practiced how to talk to the educators: to ask permission to leave, explain what he would do if he had the urge to run away (focus on something blue to remind him of the room), and plan what he would do if allowed to leave the room. He successfully communicated that to the educator as I sat cross-legged in the small room with him. I let him leave the room first, following behind him. Waya immediately walked over to a designated desk about 10 feet from the door of the room to begin working on an assignment.

Waya had not had many successful days outside the blue room, but this day was his breakthrough. The way things have always been done is not always the best or the way it has to be. This is a clear example of how we can rethink discipline to get better results. We understood the driver of the behavior: a desire to escape and a lack of fitting in with peers. We addressed this with replacement skills and intrinsic motivation to challenge him, and Waya, like kids all around the world, with this approach, rose to the occasion and was successful.

The Challenge: Punitive Discipline Is Hurting Us All

My first international speaking event was in Brussels in 2017, where I presented my framework for implementing restorative discipline in schools. One gentleman in the audience asked question after

question throughout my presentation—so many that I began to wonder if I had gotten something wrong. To my surprise, he came up afterward, shook my hand, and said that he admired my approach to school discipline. It turned out this man was Terry O'Connell, someone I had cited many times in my slides.

Terry was an Australian police sergeant and a pioneer in adapting and formalizing restorative justice within policing. In 1991, he created the Wagga Wagga Police restorative conference script and a set of restorative questions to address youth crime, later expanding this model into communities, schools, and workplaces. The last thing this 30-year veteran police officer said to me before walking away was, "I think we will heal the world through schools a lot quicker than through prisons and police."

I, too, believe deeply that restorative practices reveal a powerful path to interrupt cycles of harm and that lasting peace begins in the classroom. When we start at the root—with our students—we can see it ripple outward into communities, across states, and even globally.

I have seen the impact of restorative practices within our schools firsthand, having worked in more than two dozen countries and in almost every state in the United States. I have collaborated with researchers, government entities, and universities and implemented the strategies within this book directly into some of the most complex school environments with the highest violence rates around the world. I understand how intentional implementation, wrap around supports, and accountability loops can transform school systems.

Restorative practices can help reimagine our approach to discipline. We need a model that doesn't rely on fear and shame but instead heals, sustains accountability, and addresses the root causes of behavior with empathy and logic. Punitive discipline not only fails to create lasting change—it harms our students, teachers, parents, and everyone involved by fracturing

relationships and undermining accountability. The tools you will find in this book will build and transform your approach to discipline, ideally professionally and personally. It is about shifting the way you approach the same problems with different strategies that increase learning and improve communication.

Every educator has faced a hair-pulling moment: a classroom disruption that halts your perfectly planned lesson. All eyes turn to you, waiting to see how you'll handle it. Traditionally, we've reached for the quick fixes—sending students to the office, assigning detentions, or even using fear or shame to make the behavior stop. Sure, it feels like you're taking control when you do one of those things, but let's be honest, how often does it actually stop the negative behavior from continuing to happen in the future? What's your "return on investment" for doing the traditional discipline?

Punitive discipline doesn't correct behavior in the long run because it relies on fear as its primary motivator. Fear may generate short-term compliance, but when the motivator of fear goes away, the consequence is no longer effective and often makes things worse. Fear can quickly shift to anxiety, break down connections, and cause kids to become desensitized as a way to cope.

When we give consequences that don't match the root causes of a student's behavior, we often cause unintended harm: pain, embarrassment, or shame. These feelings come up when a student has not been given the dignity to make things right—something restorative practices support. These outdated practices cost schools time and resources, strain teachers' mental well-being, and can seriously impact a child's long-term outcomes. Punishment alone doesn't teach skill replacement or develop the prosocial behaviors we want to see more of. Fear-driven approaches also shut down the very things students need

to grow: vulnerability, trust, and connection. In some cases, they rely on exclusion that leads to ostracizing students who are already struggling, leaving them unsure how to connect to their community or form meaningful relationships.

If we want to be an embodied practitioner of the strategies in this book, we have to understand the science behind discipline, find proactive and responsive tools to implement, and establish the quality of space. When we discipline students traditionally, we sometimes miss the chance to teach them about accountability and empathy. Traditional methods often lead to resentment and repeated misbehavior. But when we shift to restorative practices, we open the door to understanding them, fixing things, and growing stronger relationships.

This change isn't just about handling disruptions better—it's about creating an environment where every student feels a sense of belonging and is given opportunities to repair harm due to valuing their community. And it begins with first seeking to understand the drivers behind a behavior. But, before we unpack this first strategy, let's take a deeper look into the science behind the top three reasons we must move away from punitive discipline.

Shifting from Control to Connection

For decades, school discipline systems have relied on external motivators like punishments or rewards to enforce compliance. But as our understanding of human behavior and motivation has evolved, it's become increasingly clear: these approaches often backfire. They may silence negative behavior temporarily, but they rarely lead to lasting growth, empathy, or self-awareness. This is because not all types of motivation are created equal.

To build schools where students thrive, not just comply, we must understand the science behind what truly motivates people, and the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. When we discipline from a place of control, we suppress students' ability to self-regulate, reflect to self-correct, and even grow. When we create systems that feed internal passions and motivation, we can build communities where students take ownership of their actions and feel a sense of belonging and purpose.

When a student follows a rule to avoid punishment, rather than valuing or respecting the reason behind a rule, this is **extrinsic motivation**. Motivation that is dependent on painful consequences often evokes emotions associated with fear. We know that fear can cause feelings of helplessness, dysregulation, anger, sadness, isolation, and several other negative emotions. This type of motivation also uses rewards to motivate us, such as:

- Positive grades
- Positive accolades
- Positive notes/calls home
- Candy, extra privileges, and other things you can "win"

Intrinsic motivation arises when we engage in behaviors that spark joy, curiosity, or a sense of purpose—making us want to repeat that activity or behavior for its own sake, rather than for external rewards or fear of consequences. The feelings behind intrinsic motivation are often connected to a sense of fulfillment. These emotions support a deeper and more lasting form of motivation that is empowering rather than controlling.

This motivation is driven by internal rewards such as:

- A sense of accomplishment
- Enjoyment of the task itself
- Personal interest or curiosity
- Desire to improve or master a skill
- Feeling aligned with personal values or purpose
- Emotional satisfaction from helping others or contributing to something meaningful

Research by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (Self-Determination Theory) shows that *extrinsic motivators like punishment actually suppress intrinsic motivation*, reducing curiosity, creativity, and authentic engagement. Instead of building self-regulation, it creates fear-driven compliance. A student repeatedly sent to detention for talking out of turn might stop participating altogether—not because they've learned respect but because they fear the punishment. They internalize the message: *Stay silent, don't be yourself.*

Students in zero-tolerance schools often show higher dropout rates and lower test scores, not better behavior (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008). One compelling body of evidence comes from a study referenced in *Drive* by Daniel Pink. The same researchers from the Self-Determination Theory also found that when institutions like schools, families,

sports teams, or businesses use external rewards and punishments to control behavior, they inadvertently undermine intrinsic motivation. To be clear, the more we try to manage people's behavior through power and consequences, the less ownership the other person feels over their choices and the less likely they are to grow into self-regulating, empathetic individuals.

Discipline systems rooted in control often miss the deeper goal of helping people *understand* their actions and *repair* harm. We need a shift from compliance to a focus on growth, from punitive consequences to relational accountability, and from kids feeling helpless to feeling empowered to make things right.

If we want students to develop empathy, self-awareness, and responsibility, our discipline practices must reflect those values. We can't afford to confuse momentary compliance or obedience with real behavioral shifts. This book will go over strategies to bring intrinsic motivation into your discipline practices and classroom management.

Fear-Based Discipline Desensitizes Kids

I still remember, as a kid, what it felt like to be yelled at, to have things taken away without explanation, and being ordered to do something for no other reason than "because I said so." Consequences were handed down quickly, meant to punish, not to teach me a better, more meaningful way to do something. They were rooted in fear.

Eventually, I stopped caring. Not just about the rules but even about myself and others. I felt dangerously numb. I was a pre-teen carrying weapons, living in constant survival mode, desensitized to the consequences that were meant to "keep me in line."

At its worst, fear-based discipline asks kids to follow rules that are arbitrary or even cruel, causing them to shut down

emotionally. It doesn't teach; it controls. And when control is the goal, compliance becomes the only way to win . . . but at what cost?

My theory: Fear kills curiosity, smothers empathy, and stifles the sparks of passion a kid might be developing. Obedience may keep things quiet in the short term, but the research also shows it blocks the release of dopamine and oxytocin, the chemicals that help kids feel connected, happy, and confident!

When we raise kids on obedience instead of exploration and growth, we're not building thinkers. We're training followers. We're not teaching emotional intelligence—we're suppressing it. And we've known this for a long time. Even back in 1991, a study by Baumrind found that kids raised under authoritarian parenting styles were more likely to struggle with anxiety, depression, and resentment toward authority throughout their lives. So, if we know this, why are we still choosing fear over understanding?

Punitive Discipline Doesn't Support Conflict Resolution Skills and Learning

When punitive discipline happens, students are often removed from the conflict rather than invited to learn through it. A student gets suspended or sent out of class, and suddenly, the opportunity to teach conflict resolution is gone. The problem might be paused, but nothing has really been solved—and certainly nothing has been taught.

We can't expect students to navigate conflict better in the future if we haven't taught them the skills to do so. And punitive consequences don't teach replacement behaviors; they are quick and standardized.

When I was working in residential care, I learned that if I didn't teach through a logical consequence the behavior would typically happen again. Working directly on the violent offender unit, I saw students who didn't fear consequences. Fear would trigger them

more but logical accountability felt safe and a problem they could solve instead of having something just done to them. I found that when I unpacked with them how their behavior caused harm and involved them in a plan to repair it, the kids showed a stronger sense of accountability and commitment to change.

Neuroscience backs up why this happens. In *The Whole-Brain Child*, neuropsychiatrist Daniel J. Siegel and parenting expert Tina Payne Bryson explain how shame and fear light up the brain's fight/flight system, impairing memory, problem-solving, and emotional regulation. In contrast, emotionally safe learning environments activate the prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain responsible for decision-making and empathy. This shows me that we can't teach empathy if we do it using fear-based approaches.

As Dr. Brené Brown's research shows, vulnerability is the birthplace of learning, growth, and connection. But when students are punished into silence, they lose the chance to practice that vulnerability, just when they need it most. Instead of shutting kids down, we need to help them understand the driver behind their behavior, how to build back trust, and give them chances to repair harm.

The Strategy: Understanding What's Behind the Behavior

All behavior is a form of communication. When students act out, they are telling us something—maybe they are bored, frustrated, sad, or struggling at home. Our job as educators is to become behavior detectives to uncover the underlying drivers or triggers for why the behavior occurred when it did.

This is always the starting point for using restorative practices.

So, what could be driving the behavior? There are often three fundamental reasons kids act out: power and autonomy

struggles, skills deficits (emotional, academic, or social), and/or unmet needs (emotional or physiological).

Power and autonomy struggles: Kids crave a sense of control, especially in systems where they feel powerless. Acting out becomes a way to:

- Assert independence
- Push back against authority
- Regain a sense of agency after feeling helpless or overlooked

A power struggle might look like asking a student to stop texting in class and receiving a flat "No." You lock eyes, fold your arms, and respond, "Put away your cell phone right now," standing there waiting for them to comply. With other students watching as you assert your dominance, the student may try to "save face" and push back more. This type of assertive reaction can also sometimes create an amygdala response—a fight, flight, or freeze state. Adults and kids both want peace and a sense of control. When we respond with calm, assertive redirection, without adding additional pressure or shame, we allow the student to hear us more clearly.

Restorative practices help create a fair, balanced power dynamic between adults and students by giving kids a sense of voice and control in how situations are handled. Instead of demanding compliance, we should redirect with a brain-aligned strategy by offering two choices. For example, you might say, "You can either put the phone away, or I'll need to decide what happens next. I'll give you a minute to think about it." Then step away. When we present them with just two ideas, we can move the thinking from the amygdala to the prefrontal cortex, ideally, allowing room for a good decision to be made.

That moment of space matters a lot—it gives the student a chance to pause, reflect, and choose without pressure. One option allows them to meet the expectation and keep their power

(by putting the phone away without taking further action). The other carries a consequence, but because it wasn't spelled out, it avoids the common trap where students weigh whether the consequence is "worth it." This subtle shift preserves student dignity, reinforces expectations, and gives them real-time practice in making thoughtful decisions.

If they choose not to put away the cell phone in the one-minute redirection time, that's when we implement a logical consequence.

Also, it's important to realize that sometimes, what might seem like a power struggle is actually a student trying to test the boundaries, fulfill an underlying need for autonomy, or gain control when they are feeling fear or anxiety. So, it's important to use standardized ways to redirect that help us to check any bias we may have and see the situation clearly for what it is.

Skills deficits: A lot of behaviors that we label as "defiance" are actually signs of deficits in the following areas:

- **Emotional regulation,** including difficulty managing frustration.
- **Executive functioning,** more common with ADHD, autism, and trauma survivors.
- **Communication,** most often with students acting out to divert attention away from academic struggles, from fear of being seen as behind.

When students are missing key social, emotional, or behavioral skills, those gaps often show up as "attention-seeking behaviors." But what if we looked at these not as problems to be punished but as a message to be read? In many cases, these are actually connection-seeking behaviors—a student's way of saying, "I don't know how to get my needs met, but I need someone to notice me."

Students rarely say, "I need help" or "I want to feel seen." Instead, they more often act out, interrupt, or challenge expectations—not to be difficult but because they're missing the skills to connect in more appropriate ways.

When kids don't know how to communicate the connection they need, they behave in ways that demand it. For example, a student who throws a pencil across the room might really be saying, "Please see me. I feel invisible," or "I want people to like me in class, I don't know how to fit in." Connection-seeking behaviors can look like interrupting or ignoring, yelling in class, eye-rolling, physical aggression, destroying items, running away, lying, and exaggerating.

When we respond to those behaviors with punishment or harsh correction, we often miss the root cause: the skill deficit. Even our tone or body language can unintentionally feed the behavior by reinforcing the student's belief that the only way to get attention is through disruption.

Instead, a more effective and compassionate approach is to quietly redirect without shaming, and just as importantly, proactively give positive attention when the student is meeting expectations. This builds connection and reinforces the very skills they're missing.

Connection-seeking behaviors often signal an unmet need or lagging skill. If we shift our lens from punishment to skill-building, we don't just manage behavior—we train it.

Unmet needs: Sometimes our students may not have eaten that morning, or even in a couple of days. Sometimes they may not have slept the night before, or they have family issues preventing them from going home. There are many reasons why our students may be acting out, but unmet needs are often the base for a student not feeling regulated. We can try to guess the unmet needs, but the best way to identify them is through a solid relationship. When you have a relationship with a student, they can feel comfortable sharing good things as well as challenges.

Neuroscience shows that trauma rewires children's brains into survival mode quicker than normal. More than 50 years of research confirms strong links to delayed emotional processing, instability, stress responses, and atypical neural development. Experiences of maltreatment have been shown to impact multiple brain structures. Healing happens by teaching the brain new patterns and understanding that developing executive functioning skills can build stronger pathways to improve in areas where deficits exist.

What does that look like in the classroom? It might be the kid who explodes over a pencil falling on the floor and breaking. Or the one who refuses to follow directions—not because they're "defiant" but because their brain is constantly wired for danger, and your redirection might trigger something that makes them feel insecure.

These behaviors aren't problems to fix; they're signals showing us where training is needed. They're the brain's way of saying, "Something is wrong, and I don't have the skills to handle it." Or it might be the need for safety, for belonging, for understanding, or just someone to ask, "What's going on?" instead of "What's wrong with you?"

To address this, schools need to shift from being compliance-driven to needs-responsive and curious. That means training staff in trauma-informed strategies, restorative practices, creating systems that prioritize relationships, and giving students access to emotional support.

How to Guide: Discipline That Seeks to Understand

Let's break down the steps to implementing these strategies in your classroom.

Step 1: Identify the Behavior

Start by observing and documenting the behavior. You can even document the situation, frequency of behavior, possible triggers, and patterns. This helps you understand the bigger picture and identify and know how quickly you should intervene.

A simple way to quickly think about what discipline action you need to take starts with looking through the three drivers we've talked about. Is it an unmet need, a skill deficit, or a desire for connection or personal sense of power?

Ask yourself questions like:

- *Is this student struggling with something academic or social?*
- *Could this be a connection-seeking behavior that just doesn't come out in the most helpful way?*
- *Do I sense a power struggle forming, or are they craving some autonomy?*

When we pause, regulate, and reflect on patterns like this, we start to create a blueprint for how we should engage. That gives us insight to support the student, instead of just reacting to what we see or feel on the surface. It's not about having all the answers. Sometimes it's just about knowing which questions to ask ourselves first.

Step 2: Use Active Listening

Active listening is seriously a secret weapon. When a student misbehaves, engage with the student in a nonconfrontational conversation and take a moment to truly listen to their side of the story. Ask open-ended questions like:

- "What happened?"
- "What's going on?"

- “What were you feeling at the time?”
- “What do you need right now?”
- “What could we do differently next time?”

This shows you care to learn about their perspective first before judging with a response.

Active listening is about noticing the emotions and feelings behind the words. Students can feel the difference when we listen to truly try to understand them, and they’re more likely to open up and engage in the process of finding a solution when they feel that you sincerely care. It builds trust and mutual respect, making students more open to your guidance.

Take the time to build a relationship with students through listening. Show genuine interest in their well-being and make it clear that you’re there to help. Understanding the why behind the behavior is crucial for finding effective ways for them to be successful long-term.

Step 3: Set Expectations, Reflect, and Build a Plan Together

Accountability can be a learning opportunity if we allow students to be active participants in the discipline process. We can teach kids that they have the ability to maintain their sense of power if they follow expectations. One way to do this is by co-constructing alignments to make sure you are both on the same page about what happened with a plan for repair, if needed.

Empower your students by involving them in finding solutions to their problems. When students have a say in how to make things right, they’re more likely to take ownership of their actions. Ask them, “What do you think needs to happen to fix this?” Then guide them toward constructive solutions.

Involving students in the problem-solving process helps them develop critical thinking and decision-making skills. It also

reinforces the idea that they have the power to make positive changes. When students are part of the solution, they're also more invested in the outcome and more likely to follow through.

Create a plan for repairing the harm together. Ensure the plan is clear, specific, actionable, and time-bound. This might include written or spoken apologies, restitution, community service, or helping out in the classroom. The key is to make the consequence meaningful and related to the behavior. The plan should also be realistic and achievable, with specific deadlines to ensure accountability. By doing this, you build dignity through active accountability, responsibility to fix things, and a path to growth. This is a process that builds trust and emotional intelligence.

Step 4: Follow-Through

Monitor the student's progress and provide ongoing support. Check in regularly to see how they're doing and offer guidance as needed. Revisit the plan if necessary and acknowledge improvements. This shows the student that you're invested in their growth and success.

Regular follow-ups demonstrate that you care about the student's development and are committed to helping them succeed. It's also important to celebrate their progress and provide constructive feedback to keep them on track. This ongoing support reinforces the positive changes and helps prevent future misbehavior.

What Could Go Wrong?

When we react to student behavior from a place of frustration or urgency, we risk escalating the situation. A raised voice, sharp tone, or visible annoyance, even if unintentional, can trigger a

student's stress response, especially for those with trauma histories. Rather than calming the moment, we may fuel dysregulation. The opportunity to build trust, model emotional regulation, and teach skills goes away. Without a calm and restorative response, discipline becomes something we *do to* students, rather than something we build *with* them. Our regulation is key.

This is why, before we can get to the root of the driver of a behavior, we must take a moment to make sure we are calm. As Dr. Bruce Perry says, "A dysregulated adult can never regulate a dysregulated child," in the book he co-authored with Oprah Winfrey, *What Happened to You?: Conversations on Trauma*, *Resilience*, *and Healing*.

Stay clear with your words, neutral with your emotions, and calm but assertive with your tone. Take a deep breath, think about your happy place, and redirect with a clear mind. This approach can help de-escalate the conflict and give you more capacity to listen with curiosity.

Staying calm doesn't mean being passive. It means maintaining control of your emotions and responding thoughtfully. You teach more from your actions than your words. Your ability to stay grounded will be an example for students to model, showing them how to handle conflicts. In Chapter 5, we'll explore this further and equip you with strategies for self-regulation and co-regulation.

Once you feel regulated and ready, you can approach the student and show them you are actively listening with these cues:

- **Make eye contact:** Show students you're engaged. Don't force students to make eye contact with you, but do show them you notice them.
- **Nod and provide validation:** Acknowledge understanding. Summarizing and showing you understand the emotions behind their words is crucial.

- **Avoid interrupting:** Let students finish their thoughts. Use open questions to steer the conversation forward.

Scenario: Stay Curious: A Parent Driving Their Son Home After School

Staying curious is the foundation to understanding behavior. Going back to the three major reasons kids may act out, here is an example of how staying curious can help to neutralize power struggles (shifting the dynamic from control to collaboration), create a safe space for connection (invites emotional availability rather than shame), and practice being a behavior detective to uncover unmet needs (asks the *why*, rather than the *what*).

Parent (Using Open-Ended Questions and Affirmations):

> *"Hey, I've noticed you seem kind of off lately—like you've got a lot on your mind. You're usually bouncing around and love to talk with me, but lately, you seem quieter. I can see it at school, and even with chores at home. What's going on?"*

(Instead of asking "Why are you acting like this?" which can feel accusatory, this approach observes behavior without judgment and invites the child to talk.)

Son (Shrugs, Avoidant):

> *"I dunno. Nothing's wrong."*

Parent (Reflective Listening and Normalizing Feelings):

> *"Hmm. Yeah, I get that. Sometimes I don't even know why I feel off either. But I can tell something' is weighing on you. I wonder if it's something around school or home that is feeling kind of frustrating lately?"*

(Here, the parent reflects back what they're seeing while also leaving space for the child to clarify.)

Son (Small Admission, Still Deflecting):

> *"School's fine. It's just boring."*

Parent (Rolling with Resistance and Expanding the Conversation):

> *"Boring? I feel you. Sitting still all day, dealing with assignments . . . . I struggled when I was a kid, Bro. Is there something at home that I could help you with or that you want to vent about?"*

(Instead of contradicting or pushing back, the parent goes with the child's response and asks a nonthreatening follow-up question.)

Son (Opens Up a Little More):

> *"I don't know. I just hate having to drive so far. It takes us 50 minutes to get to school every morning and then another 50 minutes to get home. I wish you lived closer to Mom."*

Parent (Validating and Evoking Change):

> *"Yeah. I understand that it is so boring being stuck in a car that long every morning and evening when you're with me. I know we want to move closer, but I need to save up a bit longer before I can move. Since we can't really change the drive, since you love seeing me and want to go to the same school you go to now, how about we come up with something fun we can do every car ride?"*

(The parent acknowledges emotions rather than dismissing them and helps the child start thinking about ways to take action.)

Son (Starting to Reflect):

> *"Yeah. I guess. But I don't know what."*

Parent (Empowering and Problem-Solving Together):

> *"It's tough to come up with something on the spot. Let's brainstorm together, but I want you to know I love you and understand this drive sucks, Bro. If anything, though, is ever on your mind outside of just the drive, know you can come to me with anything, and we will always decide how to respond with what you tell me together."*

(Now, the parent shifts toward empowerment, making the child an active participant in the solution or understanding that future support is available.)

Why This Works:

No interrogation, no pressure: Just a laid-back or low-stakes conversation.

Open-ended questions: Instead of "Are you okay?" (which invites a shutdown "Yeah, I'm fine"), the questions are more curious and go with the flow of the conversation naturally.

Reflective listening: The parent repeats back what they hear, showing understanding without judgment.

Normalizes feelings, uses directness, and humor: Acknowledging the frustration makes the child feel less alone, which keeps their mind open to understanding. When someone is struggling, being direct and light-hearted goes a long way. It signals compassion in your interaction, which helps to naturally de-escalate interactions with others.

Rolls with resistance: The parent doesn't push; *they follow the child's lead* and guide them toward self-discovery.

Encouraging the child to problem-solve: Instead of *telling* the child what to do, they give them autonomy by *evoking* personal or collaborative solution development. Keeping the child in control of the conversation helps keep it moving forward.

Parent Huddle

It Takes a Village: The Power of the Parent Huddle

Kids don't just grow up in classrooms. They grow up in kitchens, on couches, in cars, with friends, online, and in interactions happening long after the last school bell rings. If we really want to build consistent, meaningful change in how we approach behavior, we have to include families as part of the team. That's where the *parent huddle* comes in.

Parent huddles offer parents an opportunity to learn and use similar strategies we are using in school at home; it's a consistency bridge. They are a way to share one simple, easy-to-implement discipline strategy at a time that matches classroom discipline. Parents often want to help but may feel unsure how to respond when their child is acting out or struggling emotionally. This gives us an easy "start here" point for them by helping create consistency in one strategy instead of just a list of ones to try.

If you're a parent yourself, you can bring these strategies home and model them in your own family life. If you're an educator, you can coach parents gently and respectfully, sharing what's worked and walking alongside them as they build new skills, too, with this consistency bridge. This parent huddle is about creating a safe space for sharing and active listening.

Hold Regular Circles at Home Establishing regular family meetings as a circle will help you strengthen relationships at home, prepare kids with communication skills, and create a proactive structure to help navigate the difficult conversations when they come. Here are the steps:

1. Create a regular time where you can practice a circle with your family.

2. Start with mindfulness, like deep breathing together or pleasant imagery, to center everyone.
3. In the circle, it's best to start by discussing fun and interesting topics. Then you can move into navigating deeper conversations that require vulnerability. Like "What have you been thinking, feeling, or needing after grandma passed away?" If you start immediately with that topic without ever practicing regular family meetings or circles, your kids might not be ready to open up as quickly.
4. Create the expectations that allow everyone to have their voice heard when discussing the topic and what to do if someone doesn't agree.
5. Use a "Talking Piece," which can be something you have at home that is meaningful to everyone. Whoever holds this is the only one who talks at that time in the circle. It creates an easy, fun way to practice active listening and focused attention.
6. Create a closing activity/ritual at the end of the circle to bring a sense of fun (for example, write down a shared goal for the week or listen to a favorite song together).

The power of this activity is that you are modeling healthy communication and giving your family a regular outlet to be heard. If we continue to build structures that are protective and teaching in the home, I believe we will see more thriving students in the classroom.