CHAPTER 1

Foundations of Behavior

What Does Behavior Have to Do with Universal Supports?

Behavior. It's everything that we think, say, or do. We often hear things like, "Ugh, Johnny had *another behavior* today." And our internal thought response is "Well, I hope he is engaging in behavior. Otherwise, he's dead." There's this misconception that behaviors are just the problematic things that students do when, in reality, it's everything that we do . . . all day, every day.

Another common misconception is thinking of behaviors as only being observable, meaning anyone around the individual can see or hear the behavior occurring. While we do engage in external behaviors that can be seen or heard by others, this does not encompass all forms of behavior. We also engage in internal behaviors like thoughts that can then drive our external, observable behaviors.

Here are two examples of behaviors a student may engage in within the classroom when presented a task that is difficult for them:

They may think "I'm so stupid; I can't do this."
And they may say "This is dumb!"
And what they may do is swipe their textbook off their desk.

They may think "I hate writing argumentative essays."
And may say "This is hard, but I can do hard things."
And what they may do is type the assignment on their Chromebook.

The first example demonstrates behaviors that we may label as negative, disruptive, inappropriate, undesirable, unexpected, or challenging. The second example demonstrates behaviors we may label as positive, appropriate, expected, or desirable. To keep things simple throughout this text, we will be using the term *challenging behavior* to describe distracting, disruptive, or dangerous behaviors that interfere with the student's learning or the learning of others in some way. We will use the term *desirable behavior* to describe behavior that meets classroom expectations or is generally considered appropriate for the situation or setting.

Challenging Behavior:

Distracting, disruptive, or dangerous behavior that interferes with the student's learning or the learning of others.

While it is important to discriminate between challenging and desirable behaviors, we'd be remiss if we didn't pause to talk about the difference a bit more to reframe our thinking.

Let's consider the following two statements:

Typically, as educators, when we discuss student behavior, we consider our needs and the behaviors that we want to see less of. These very well may be distracting, disruptive, or dangerous behaviors that interfere with our ability to teach. However, when we focus solely on *our* needs, this places responsibility on the student to change their behaviors without considering why they are occurring. And this sets ourselves and students up for failure.

If we reframe our thinking to consider what we need to do, what students need to do, and how we can support them in doing so, we are more likely to achieve long-term positive behavior change. *It is important to recognize that for student behavior to change, adult behavior must also change*. We are part of the environment. We set the stage for success or failure within the walls of our classroom through our relationships, our structures and routines, the use of effective strategies, and our responses to both desirable and challenging behaviors.

As we move through this text, you will notice that we continually highlight the adult behaviors we must engage in to support our students. We propose that any interventions to create long-term behavior change be implemented with the goal of increasing a student's skills, their overall functioning, their ability to form and maintain relationships, and/or their independence. This is what behavior analysts refer to as *social significance*, and ethically, all interventions should consider this. We must look beyond "compliance" with adult instructions and expectations as the singular goal. If we operate under the mindset that they just need to suppress challenging behaviors, do as they are told, and meet expectations, we *will not* achieve long-term behavior change.

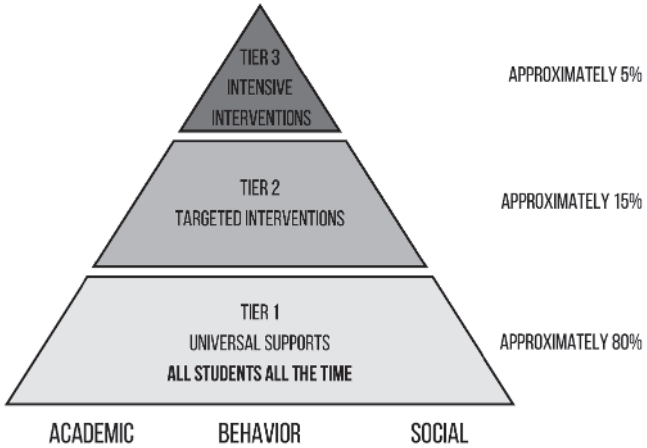
To understand our and our students' behavior, we need to understand four core truths of behavior:

- **Behavior is circumstantial:** It does not occur in a vacuum, out of the blue, or without reason. Everything we do is directly influenced by the environment in which

the behavior occurs. If we fail to consider the context under which the behavior is occurring, we will fail to effectively support our students. We will also see the challenging behavior continue. For example, if Johnny is an angel in Mr. Smith's class, following all classroom expectations and completing his work, but engages in disruptive behaviors in your class, then the context is different. There is something different within the environment that is setting the stage for the disruptive behavior. It may be that you interact differently with Johnny. Your classroom routines may be different, or your subject requires different skills (academic, social, or behavioral). Or, perhaps, the peer group or instructional format is different.

- **Behavior has underlying influences:** There are a wide variety of factors that impact individual human behavior. For example, genetic disorders can predispose an individual to engage in certain behavior. Likewise, medical conditions can result in behaviors that increase an individual's sensitivity to environmental stimuli. Medical conditions can also cause pain and discomfort for which a behavior, once engaged in, decreases or eliminates that pain. Traumatic experiences, both acute and chronic, impact an individual's future behavioral responses to events or stimuli within their environment. Being without access to something that is desired, such as food, can influence behaviors that assist the individual in getting what they need. Conversely, having too much of something (having eaten and being full) can decrease engagement in behaviors that result in obtaining food. Finally, we can generally consider factors that influence behaviors as setting events as they increase or decrease the likelihood of certain behaviors occurring when in play. For example, missing daily medication, poor sleep the night before, or feeling unwell may increase the chance of challenging behaviors occurring. Underlying influences are important to consider because when we are aware of them, we can make adjustments to support ourselves and our students more effectively. A note of caution: while it is important to consider and identify underlying influences of challenging behaviors, it is important to move beyond admiring their occurrence. Just because an underlying influence is present doesn't mean we can't implement strategies to lessen their impact.
- **Behavior is functional:** All behavior serves a purpose or meets a need for the individual engaging in it. This is true even if the behavior seems odd, out-of-context, or disproportionate to the situation. This behavior may be the only behavior the student knows how to engage in, in a moment of stress, to meet their needs. We can categorize all behaviors as either helping us to "get" more of the things that we want/like or "get away" from the things that we don't want/like. It's important to note that, sometimes, we do consciously think about what behavior we are going to engage in to meet a particular need in the moment. However, most of the time, we behave "automatically" because in the past certain behaviors have helped us to get or get away from things. This learning history influences our behaviors, as does our skill level, and the overall need for safety and quick outcomes. It's imperative that we consider the function or purpose of a behavior because simply trying to eliminate it without addressing the need it is meeting is unlikely to increase more desirable behaviors.
- **Behavior can be changed:** What we do or don't do has the potential to influence behavior, leading to an increase or decrease in challenging behaviors over time. To

effectively change behavior, we can and should consider the circumstances under which it occurs, the factors that are influencing it, and the purpose or need it is serving. We can implement preventative strategies, including the universal supports outlined in this book, teach and reinforce desirable behaviors, and respond effectively to challenging behaviors to increase student independence, grow engagement, and improve quality of life.



At this point, you may be wondering how behavior, universal supports, and classroom management link to create optimal conditions for learning. More than likely, you are familiar with one or more of the following terms: Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Response to Intervention (RTI), and Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS). These frameworks share a similarity in that they all include supports and interventions within a three-tiered approach. The lowest tier (tier 1) is considered the universal support tier, wherein all students receive the same core supports. Statistically, most students (approximately 80%) will be successful with these supports in place and will not require additional supports. However, approximately 15% of a student population may require additional "targeted" tier 2 supports, and another 5% may require "intensive" tier 3 supports.

The key component we are focusing on within this book is tier 1 universal supports, which are provided to all students all the time, with the following goals:

- Promoting positive and effective learning environments
- Preventing challenging behaviors
- Limiting discrimination
- Supporting all students

This is a big goal, without a lot of details of what strategies to utilize. In fact, ask any educator, and you are likely to hear many different interpretations and understandings of what these tiered levels include. For example, within the PBIS framework, many educators believe that the universal support level is simply a school store to reinforce student

behavior. While a school store may be included within a PBIS framework, it is certainly not the only component and in reality isn't even necessary.

Effective classroom management plays a significant role within the implementation of universal supports as well. If you search for a definition of classroom management, you are likely to find a variety of definitions. Key phrases may include "Procedures," ". . .an environment conducive to learning," "Actions a teacher takes," ". . .successful instruction can occur," "Skills and techniques teachers use. . .," and ". . .keep students on-task."

Overall, implementing universal supports, which include effective classroom management strategies, requires that adults engage in specific behaviors that then increase the likelihood of our students engaging in specific behaviors that increase their engagement and overall learning. However, to be able to implement universal supports effectively, we must know what strategies to implement and why and how to implement them.

The Brain: The Not-So-Big Elephant in the Room

To better understand behavior, both that of our students and our own, we want to provide you with a basic understanding of how our brain impacts our behaviors, because remember, our behavior is directly impacted by our environment and underlying influences, and it serves a purpose to us. Additionally, we learned that behavior includes internal or private behaviors that may not be observed by others but can drive observable external behaviors. Gaining an understanding of the role of the brain in behavior will assist you in effectively supporting your students (as well as yourself) *and* lead to increased engagement.

Our brains contain three main divisions: the cerebrum, cerebellum, and brain stem. The cerebrum is the largest of the divisions, making up approximately 80% of our brain, and its different parts are responsible for interpreting our environment and regulating our emotions, reasoning, and learning. Of most importance to what we are talking about is the role of the prefrontal cortex within the frontal lobes. Located behind our foreheads, this upper front of our brain can simply be described as our "thinking" brain. When all is well within our environment, we can use our prefrontal cortex (thinking brain) appropriately. We can be considered rational; we are generally available for learning, social interactions, and completing tasks; and we are typically able to place a bit more space between our internal thoughts and our observable behaviors. In addition, we are better able to access and utilize our executive functions to assist us in getting things done (Professional, 2024).

Executive Functions:

The cognitive processes that enable us to regulate and direct our behavior in order to begin tasks and achieve goals.

It's common to consider the prefrontal cortex as being like the cockpit of an airplane. It's essentially the control system for all that we need to accomplish. When we are flying and all cockpit controls are working properly, we can process information, communicate our wants and needs, regulate our emotions, utilize good judgment and reasoning skills, plan for what is coming up, and think before we act. Essentially, executive functions are the foundation of everything that we do, and our use of our executive functioning skills allows us to keep our plane safely in the air moving toward our destination.

There are many executive functioning skills that support our overall abilities to regulate our behavior through selecting, problem-solving, persisting, and ultimately achieving goals. A list of these, as described by Dawson and Guare (2018), is shown here:

Core Executive Function Skills

- **Response inhibition:** The ability to think before you act, to resist the urge to do something
- **Emotional control:** The ability to manage your behaviors under stressful circumstances
- **Working memory:** The ability to retain and draw upon information when needed
- **Attention control:** The ability to attend to relevant stimuli despite distraction or a decrease in motivation
- **Task initiation:** The ability to begin tasks efficiently and in a timely manner
- **Planning:** The ability to create a roadmap to complete a task or navigate a routine
- **Organization:** The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information and materials
- **Time management:** The ability to accurately estimate the time one has to complete a task and then allocate that time accordingly
- **Persistence:** The ability to follow through on the completion of a task or goal
- **Flexibility:** The ability to revise a plan and adapt to changing conditions
- **Metacognition:** The ability to self-monitor and self-evaluate one's own behaviors

See the appendix's Form 1.1 for a one-page cheat-sheet of these executive skills.

As you read this list, did it strike you how important each of these executive functioning skills are to each of us every single day? Did you perhaps recognize some of these executive functioning skills as a strength or weakness for you? Did you think of a student who struggles with one or more of these?

Having strong, well-developed executive functioning skills positively impacts our mental health, physical health, performance in school/work, and overall quality of life. Underdeveloped executive functions adversely impact these areas and may make it more difficult to form and maintain relationships. The good news is, executive functioning skills can be taught and strengthened over time, as they are behaviors that we can learn, practice, and master.

While we are born with the ability to develop and utilize executive functions, our environment heavily impacts their development. If we live in a chaotic home with individuals who struggle to regulate their emotions and use other important executive functions, there

will likely be minimal modeling and opportunities to practice these skills. Individuals with autism, ADHD, certain genetic disorders, as well as those who have experienced chronic childhood trauma, often have underdeveloped executive functioning. This then adversely impacts their educational success and can result in school feeling extremely stressful and difficult to navigate. Many times, challenging behaviors are due in part to underdeveloped executive functioning skills.

As educators, we often fail to recognize the impact of both developed and underdeveloped executive functioning skills. Daily, we observe our students either meeting expectations or not meeting expectations and engaging in some form of challenging behavior. We often assume they have the necessary knowledge, skills, and motivation to do what is expected of them within the classroom and school setting. This assumption leads us to take their challenging behavior personally or even blame the student. However, when we make this assumption, we are neglecting to consider that the student may be lacking a particular set of skills that would help them be more successful and engage in desirable behaviors more often. Because the routines, activities, and related executive functioning skills required of students are constantly changing throughout the day, it's critical that we engage in a set of core practices that support the ongoing development of these skills.

It's also healthy to consider your own strengths and weaknesses (your potential areas of improvement) when it comes to executive functioning as this impacts your classroom leadership, structure, and environment. Remember that behavior has underlying influences. If we are disorganized, struggle to plan and prepare instruction, or respond emotionally to challenges, we are going to see that reflected in our students' challenging behavior. It truly takes a skilled educator to reflect on the part of the day that results in the most challenging behavior and reflect on what skills they need to improve upon in addition to the student. Form 1.2 in the appendix will assist you in reflecting on your own strengths and weaknesses.

Activity: Spot the Skill

Executive functions: Response inhibition (impulse control), emotional control, working memory, sustained attention, task initiation, planning, organization, time management, persistence, flexibility, metacognition (monitoring and evaluation)

Read through the following scenarios. Identify which executive skills may be impacting the success of both teacher and students.

Scenario 1: *Mrs. Johnson's small group tables are often covered in miscellaneous papers, books, and personal belongings. She has been noticing that students are quick to start fooling around when they sit down as she searches for the lesson materials. She also observes that her groups typically take a while to start the activities after her mini-lesson, save for her three "brightest students."*

Related **student** EF skills(s): _____

Related **teacher** EF Skill(s): _____

(continued)

Activity: Spot the Skill (*continued*)

Scenario 2: *Mr. Peterson prides himself on his engaging lessons. He states that he and his students end up having "so much fun" that he usually ends up running out of time at the end of each activity. He notices his class struggles to "rein it back in" as they rush out the door to next period. Some of his students often forget to write down their homework and as a result are close to failing the class. "They just need to start being more responsible; I can't do everything for them," he often states.*

Related **student** EF Skill(s): _____
Related **teacher** EF Skill(s): _____

Scenario 3: *Ms. Thompson often finds herself raising her voice and out of frustration removing minutes off her class's recess due to frequent off-task behavior during writing. She complains, "I tell them over and over again what to do – they are in fifth grade, they know how to write a paragraph! This is the laziest class I've had in my teaching career. I'm not going to coddle them and hold their hand through the entire activity. If they don't want to pay attention, they can suffer the consequences."*

Related **student** EF Skill(s): _____
Related **teacher** EF Skill(s): _____

Let's now return to our airplane analogy to continue our discussion of the role of the brain in behavior. When we are flying and our environment is safe, there is good weather, and all our equipment is properly functioning; our cockpit, the prefrontal cortex, is in control of our behaviors. However, when we encounter a stormy environment, our cockpit no longer works as efficiently, and we are required to implement our safety protocols.

The same is true when we encounter individual triggers or stressors that we perceive as a threat. When this happens, our thinking brain turns control over to our limbic system, specifically our amygdala, with the goal of maintaining safety and ensuring our survival. Our limbic system accomplishes this by releasing cortisol and adrenaline, increasing our respirations to increase oxygen, increasing our heart rate to improve blood flow, and tensing our muscles – all to prepare us to keep ourselves safe.

When these triggers occur, our response to them occurs like a reflex. In that moment, the threat of consequences such as losing recess, missing out on a PBIS buck, or parents being called doesn't matter. At this point, we have very little space between our thoughts and our actions, and it's difficult to focus. Our ability to access and utilize our executive skills decreases significantly, as does our ability to communicate and reason. We are essentially no longer able to access our rational brain, and we are in survival mode. When students are in this place, they are not available for reasoning, rationalizing, or teaching. Our job is to keep them safe and assist them in regulating so that they can return controls to their prefrontal cortex.

Usually, when we think of the need to maintain our safety, we think of the obvious need to maintain our *physical safety* such as when the house is on fire or someone is physically hurting/threatening us. So, when we observe our students engaging in behaviors such as refusal, eloping, screaming, cursing, hiding, or destroying property, we don't always recognize it as a way of maintaining physical safety for themselves. Rather, we might see it as lazy, as manipulative, as provocative, or even as a choice. However, our limbic system will also take over controls when we perceive threats to our *emotional* and *psychological safety*.

The interesting phenomenon here is that this safety response will occur due to both real and perceived threats in our environment. Often, without context or knowledge of our students' histories, their responses may appear disproportionate or unwarranted for the situation. However, this occurs because something in the immediate environment shared some similarity (sight, sound, smell, tone, body language) with a past experience in which their physical, emotional, or psychological safety was threatened. Over time, these triggers can generalize and occur frequently, essentially tricking the brain into thinking there is a threat. The more time that our brains spend operating in a state of perceived threat, the more threats we are likely to perceive, which increases the safety responses from the limbic system.

For many of our students, and ourselves, a little stress here and there isn't going to lead us to heightened perceptions of threats and engagement in challenging behaviors. However, bad stressors can accumulate, resulting in chronic stress. When this occurs, it impacts our brain in the current moment and brain development over time. This is why chronic stress has such adverse implications for brain development and functioning. When we don't have the skills to work through stressors effectively, our nervous system and behaviors adjust to maintain a vigilant and reactive state. This means we are never fully relaxed, and teaching and learning feel impossible.

Environmental stressors will always be present as there is no way to fully eliminate them for our students or ourselves. *However, when we implement universal supports effectively, we have a far better chance of helping our students spend more of their time with their prefrontal cortex in charge*. This means they will be available for learning, and we will have more opportunities to provide uninterrupted instruction. Further, when they do perceive a threat and their limbic system takes over, we will have the supports in place to regulate and return to learning sooner.

Why We Do What We Do

Throughout the school day, our students are presented with instructions, tasks, and activities that they may or may not be all that interested in completing. The same is true for everyone. We don't always love all the tasks and chores we do throughout the day. This begs the question, "Why do we do what we do?"

Take a moment and consider three things you likely do each week: buy groceries, fill your vehicle with gas, and spend time with people you care about. Now, consider three reasons that you do each of these things. When considering why you engage in these behaviors,

are your reasons similar? We are guessing that you may have indicated one reason you spend time with people you care about is that you have fun when you are with them. Was having fun also a reason for buying groceries or getting gas? Probably not. However, your reasons for buying groceries might have included getting food for your family, having increased energy by having healthy food choices available, and getting out of the house. Some things must be done. And while these things aren't necessarily fun, the act of doing them results in outcomes that benefit us in some way.

There are two primary factors that influence why we do what we do: *motivation* and *reinforcement*.

Motivation:

The underlying want or need to get or get away from something. This can be an immediate or a delayed want or need.

Reinforcement:

The outcome that occurs after the behavior that increases the likelihood the behavior will be used again in the future.

Students and adults are motivated to engage in specific behaviors because of the immediate or delayed outcomes they produce. Individually, we have ongoing, underlying wants and needs at all moments of the day, which motivate us to engage in behaviors that get us access to the things we want or want to get away from. When those behaviors are effective in meeting our needs, then those behaviors have been reinforced, and we are more likely to engage in those behaviors again.

Getting or getting away from things can be accomplished with the use of desirable behaviors as well as the use of challenging behaviors. Whether an individual uses a desirable or challenging behavior in any given situation to meet their needs is determined by efficiency and skill.

Efficiency. Students and adults alike tend to use the behavior that is the most efficient in effectively meeting their needs. When we refer to efficiency, we select and use the easiest, fastest, and most reliable behavior to get or get away in that moment. We also tend to select the behavior for which we have the most muscle memory or history of using.

For example, Susie has a strong dislike for long-division worksheets; therefore, she is motivated to avoid (get away from) completing them. When presented with a worksheet, she swipes the paper off her desk and shouts "I'm not doing this." When Susie does this, her teacher consistently responds by pointing to the door and saying, "Go to the office." Susie quickly leaves, leaving her worksheet behind. In this example, Susie's disruptive behavior is easy, requiring little effort to engage in; is fast as it takes very little time to swipe and shout; and is reliable as her teacher responds the same way each time by sending her to the office. This behavior would be considered efficient for Susie in getting away from her math task.

Skill. Students and adults alike also tend to utilize behaviors for which they have the skills to do so. When we can engage in desirable behaviors to efficiently meet our needs as well as cursory skills, we are more likely to do so. However, when we lack skills such as the ability to tolerate frustration, wait, or communicate our needs, we are less likely to use the desirable behaviors in that moment to meet our needs.

For example, Wesley has a strong need for assistance and reassurance, especially when he is struggling to understand a math concept due to his significant skill gaps. When Wesley raises his hand to gain assistance from an adult, he is often told to wait or keep trying on his own until the adult can get to him. However, waiting and re-attempting on his own are cursory skills that are difficult for him. Instead, Wesley leaves his desk and begins running around the room. This consistently results in an adult guiding him back to his desk, sitting one-to-one with him, and helping him through the task. In this example, Wesley engages in the desirable behavior of raising his hand but does not have the skills to wait or try another problem. Therefore, he instead uses the more efficient behavior of leaving his desk and running around the room to efficiently gain one-to-one adult assistance.

Through the consistent implementation of universal supports, we will be able to create a classroom environment that supports all students in consistently and effectively meeting their fundamental needs. When these needs are met, motivation and appropriate behaviors increase naturally.

Fundamental Needs:

Basic, innate human psychological needs, which, when met, ensure optimal functioning.

While many different theories exist, two resonate with us as being the most impactful within the educational setting and beyond. The first is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), which posits that one's basic needs for food, water, shelter, and safety must be met before an individual is available to move up the hierarchy and meet more complex social needs such as belonging, esteem, and eventually self-actualization. As educators, we play a vital role in meeting these basic needs day in and day out for our students, no matter their background or socio-economic status. There is no argument that student basic needs must be met for learning to occur. It's awfully difficult to care much about spelling or trigonometry when you haven't eaten since yesterday's school lunch or slept in the park the night before.

The second relevant theory is Self-Determination Theory (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), which describes three additional innate, psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – and their role in student learning. Reflect for a moment on these three needs and their importance for you as an adult. Do you value having choice within your day? Are you more motivated to do the things that you feel knowledgeable and confident in? Are you

less motivated when you lack the skills to do something as well? Do you value connections with family, friends, and co-workers? Do these connections motivate your behavior in some way, shape, or form? Reflecting further, how might these three areas impact your students' motivation and behavior?

As educators, we have the power to set the weather, not only within the walls of our classrooms but also within our school community. Therefore, we should strive to ensure that these fundamental needs are met to the best of our ability as they support educators and students alike in optimal functioning. For our students, this is important because this means they are most likely to be available for learning with their prefrontal cortex in charge. Additionally, when we provide opportunities for students to meet these needs, their motivation to engage, participate, and attempt the hard things will also increase. Let's dive a bit deeper into each of these fundamental needs.

The basics: *The desire to obtain what we need for survival and daily functioning*. Many of our students arrive each day without having had enough to eat or drink or who are unsure when or how they will access food again. Some may currently be sleeping in a car, on a relative's couch, or in an apartment without a bed, a blanket, or heat. They may have slept poorly last night or the previous five nights. Another may have a toothache or an ear infection that has gone untreated. One may have been moved from one foster care setting to another unexpectedly, losing their few belongings in the process. They may be feeling over- or under-stimulated because of any of these reasons or for entirely different reasons. When any of these examples are at play, functioning is adversely impacted. Students aren't available for learning when they are starving, haven't slept, feel unsafe, or are dysregulated. Not only does their motivation to engage in expected behaviors and school-related tasks decrease, their executive functioning (working memory, inhibition, attention, cognitive flexibility, etc.) also decreases because of physiological impacts.

When considering your students' basic needs, you may consider daily probes and/or teaching your students to self-assess and to advocate for their needs. Potential probes could include the following:

Basic Needs-Probing Questions

- Does my body feel like it's had enough to eat or drink?
- Does my body feel tired?
- Am I too hot, too cold, or just right?
- Do I feel physically sick, irritated, or in pain?
- Do I feel physically and psychologically safe?
- Do I have the appropriate amount of energy and stimulation for this activity?

Autonomy: *The desire to exercise choice and have multiple degrees of freedom: the opportunity to be independent and free from the control and restriction of others*. Consider for a moment how many choices you make as an adult each day. Consider further how many choices you make each day before you even arrive at school. What about within

the school day? Do these opportunities for choice increase your motivation to do the things that must be done? Now consider how many opportunities for choice your students have throughout their school day. Are they provided with opportunities to make meaningful choices, or are they simply provided demands and expectations to meet? If we are going to maximize student motivation, we want to maximize opportunities to exercise choice within their instructional day. Doing so increases their motivation to participate, helps them persevere, and teaches them a valuable life skill.

You may want to gain feedback from your students to determine whether you are providing ample opportunities to make meaningful choices and meet their need for autonomy. Potential probes could include the following:

Autonomy-Probing Questions

- Can I respond in a way that works for me? Do I have options?
- Am I given opportunities to share my thoughts and opinions?
- Is my communication honored or do people dismiss my message?
- Am I given the opportunity to engage in activities that incorporate my interests or are important to me?

Competence: *The desire to experience mastery and feelings of accomplishment*. When we feel that we have the skills to navigate a social situation, complete a challenging task, or solve a problem, we are far more motivated to attempt to do so. In fact, being able persevere when situations are hard or uncomfortable, even when one doesn't experience the typical feelings and emotions that help drive motivation, is a skill in and of itself! Competence is about skills, and we frequently make the error of assuming our students have mastered all the skills they need to do what we are asking them to do. However, we tend to focus on academic skills and forget about other important skills that assist them in navigating the school environment and meeting expectations. Think back to our discussion of the various executive functioning skills required for success: working memory, inhibition, task initiation, flexibility, time management, planning, etc. Weaknesses in any combination of these can easily tank motivation, as does continued failure. Weaknesses in self-advocacy, communication, and coping skills adversely impact motivation as well. Further, skill deficits are the reason that most reward or incentive programs are ineffective in increasing student engagement in expected behaviors. The student may absolutely be motivated to access the reward but lack the skills needed to effectively meet criteria to do so. Instead, we see our students giving up, avoiding tasks, or engaging in disruptive behaviors because they don't have the skills to do what they need to do. When we focus on building missing skills, especially executive functioning skills, we assist them in achieving competence, thus increasing their motivation.

Teaching your students to reflect on and advocate for their needs is a meaningful strategy that will assist them now and throughout life in achieving competence. Potential probes could include the following:

Competency-Probing Questions

- Do I have the skills and resources to do what I am being asked to do?
- How confident am I that I will succeed, or keep failing?
- Do I know what my goals are? Am I making progress toward my goals?
- Am I critical of myself or do I have a positive outlook?
- Can I recover from mistakes or negative experiences?
- Can I accept these uncomfortable feelings for what they are and work through them to reach my goals?

Relatedness: *The desire to experience meaningful connections with others.* As educators we are frequently reminded of the need to build relationships with our students. But why? Consider someone who is very important to you. Why are they important to you? Do they make you feel safe, cared for, loved? Does spending time with them make you happy or bring you joy? Do you engage in activities of interest together? Do they help you to learn things? When we are truly connected to others, we can access so many things that we like and need. We feel valued, important, and that our thoughts, feelings, and voice matter to others.

Disruptions in relatedness can adversely impact our biological, psychological, and social functioning. Think about the students who are withdrawn and whom nobody seems to notice. Think too about the students who seem to use acting out as a means of being seen and connecting with others. While it may seem counterintuitive, acting out may produce predictable, sustained, high-quality attention. These interactions, sometimes taking the form of lectures or scolding, may be more efficient in gaining attention and connection than appropriate behaviors in the classroom. Students will seek connections in many forms because the need to relate to others is powerful.

Being connected and accepted by others in our environments is a protective factor that increases motivation and leads to emotional independence. Potential student probes to assess needs could include the following:

Relatedness-Probing Questions

- Do I feel accepted, well-liked, loved, noticed, and included?
- Do I feel as if people truly care about me and my needs?
- Do I feel supported during my most difficult moments?
- Am I recognized for my efforts or progress?
- Do others join me in doing things that bring me joy?

You may now be wondering how you achieve this? Or, perhaps, you're thinking this isn't real life – you can't possibly create a utopia where we effectively meet all these needs. However, you are likely already doing more of this than you think. In addition, when we intentionally plan our room design, instruction, and interactions with our students around these four fundamental needs, we transform our classroom into a space where challenging behaviors aren't necessary!

To move toward this, begin with considering your students' motivation to cross the threshold into your classroom. Do you want them entering only because they fear something bad will happen if they don't? Or do you want them entering because life is good in your classroom? Specifically, is life good because they know there is a high likelihood many of their needs will be met? Are they stepping in because they are being taught to advocate for themselves? And when they do so, you attempt to honor their attempts? Is life good in your classroom because you've worked to build a community and they feel connected to peers and staff? Do you frequently provide opportunities for autonomy and independence, increasing their motivation to participate each day? Are they excited to learn because staff focus on building competence by teaching in a way that is explicit, is engaging, and breaks things down so that they can understand? All of this is good teaching. All of this will result in creating a classroom where students enter each day with increased motivation to not only be there but engage in learning. Your students will be more likely to persevere when tasks are hard and less likely to require resource-heavy tier 2 and tier 3 support.

Activity: Time to Shine

List some of the ways you are already embedding and meeting these fundamental needs within your classroom.

The Basics

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Autonomy

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(continued)

Activity: Time to Shine (*continued*)

Competence

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Relatedness

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