

Kimberly N. Parker

## Is the Challenge *Our* Behavior?

We need new ways to respond to children of color in terms of behavior.



I'm very reticent to talk about challenging behavior and children. Most of this stems from the reality—consistently shown by data—that Black children and other children of color are disciplined in schools at

astronomical rates, especially compared to their white and Asian peers.

This situation never seems to change. Educators seem unable to gain any traction about how to respond differently to children of color in terms of behavior. Lately, I've had more conversations with colleagues about students' behavior than about their academics. I worry that this hyperfocus, brought on by the pandemic, means we'll miss opportunities to really think about how to humanize Black children and other children of color who are often silenced, pushed out of class, or ignored because of how they show up in our educational spaces.

What if we think about how we, as educators, can change our approach to interacting with students around behavior, and how we might try different behaviors that would impact students, especially those of color, more positively. Here are some ways to do so.

**1 Know the data:** School districts maintain data about the race, gender, disability status, etc. of students who've faced disciplinary actions—information that should be publicly available online. Today, find out about what's happening in your school and district. What do you notice about which students are getting suspended or even expelled? What gender and race are they? What's their disability status? What story do the data tell about how these students are treated in your

district? Then, look at your own classroom data. Which students are often "in trouble"? For what reasons? Might those patterns reveal something about your own biases? What's one step you can take to address and change these biases?

**2 Examine your policies and language:** If we made a list of all the behaviors that we find "challenging," what might this list reveal about our own cultural biases regarding behavior and gender, ability, etc.? What language do we use to frame behavioral expectations for our students? Do we use words like *comply*, *must*, and *consequence*—and if so, what impact might the tone of this language have on students? Do we rely on punishments and rewards—rewards that students who have the hardest time with behavior might never receive? We should each ask ourselves if we can cite research indicating that the practices we use for behavior management are actually effective and culturally affirming.

**3 Understand developmentally appropriate behavior:** Educators must have an informed understanding of children's developmental behaviors, taking into account age, ability, and previous experiences. Time and again, I turn to the Center for Responsive School's resource *Yardsticks: Child and Adolescent Development Ages 4-14* (Wood, 2018) to be sure I'm holding fair expectations for children I work with and not making them do things that aren't developmentally appropriate (which often happens to Black children). *Yardsticks* helps us understand children's development from a strengths-based perspective. It's also key to remember that all behavior is communication. What is a child's behavior telling us, and what might we be unwilling to hear but *need* to hear from them?

**4 Recognize and fight anti-Blackness, even within ourselves:** Comrie et al. (2022) remind us that “anti-Blackness lives in values and beliefs that can render Black bodies disposable, resulting in, among other things, the over-surveillance, over-policing, and under-protection of Black people in American society” (p. 75). In educational spaces, adults are often hypervigilant about the movements of Black children, a stance that might stem from a racist belief that Black children need to be controlled. This belief might also lead to closely monitoring and punishing what Black children wear or how they style their hair, leading to unnecessary disciplinary actions. As educators, we must be sure we are seeing Black children and other children of color as human beings, rather than bodies to be controlled.

**5 Listen and collaborate with students and caregivers:** Many schools, particularly ones with large populations of BIPOC youth, often immediately jump to increasing the presence of police in schools rather than thinking about the implications of these decisions, or even considering different alternatives. How have our students and their families been impacted by discipline policies, particularly in recent years? What’s been the experience of students who were disciplined repeatedly and what suggestions do they have about how to change or eliminate policies that have harmed them and limited their educational experiences? As we hear students’ experiences, we should consider whether our school supports community initiatives that provide supportive resources and thoughtful, culturally sensitive interventions for students, or simply consents to having more police in schools. Many schools today spend a lot of money hiring school resource officers, but as Black Lives Matter at School (n.d.) asserts: “Children need counselors, not cops.”


**6 Decide to change:** Yes, children are different now. They’ve endured a global pandemic that has left them frayed. Adults have been impacted, too. But we must ask ourselves critical questions and

act on the answers in ways that actually change our approach and improve our relationships with students. Otherwise, we’ll continue to fail to understand the causes of misbehavior and find effective ways to intervene humanely.

### What the Times Demand

These times demand that educators respond to how we’ve all changed, adults and children alike. But if we continue to blame students, especially students of color, for showing up with behaviors we don’t like, and continue to respond in ways that disproportionately impact Black children, we can’t expect anything to change. Until we look closely at the

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ways our schools make it too easy for Black children and other children of color to be overly disciplined and even pushed out of school, their behavior will always be challenging. Let’s spend as much time building relationships with students and creating high-quality, culturally responsive curriculum as we do creating behavior plans. If we change our beliefs and our practices, we’ll open up new ways of responding to kids who show problem behavior—and new academic opportunities. Perhaps, then, we’ll see promise rather than problems. 

### References

- Black Lives Matter at School. (n.d.) *Black Lives Matter at School: The Demands*.
- Comrie, J. W., Landor, A. M., Riley, K. T., & Williamson, J. D. (2022) *Anti-Blackness/Colorism*. Boston University Center for Antiracist Research.
- Wood, C. (2018). *Yardsticks: Child and adolescent development, 4-14*. Center for Responsive Schools.

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