

# A Paradigm Shift: Changing Minds, Changing Behavior

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## Moving From Coercion

I asked my 16 year old son, "How's Jamal doing?" I hadn't heard him talk about Jamal in awhile. He said, "He got kicked out of school for fighting." I pressed on trying to figure out the situation. I asked if anyone ever tried to determine why he kept getting in fights. Did anyone take the time to connect with him, to understand his lived experiences, to put structures in place? In all honesty, maybe that did happen somewhere along the way, but Jamal lived a life of poverty, family disconnection, violence and fractured relationships.

Jamal was a quiet child, an amazing athlete and was always respectful and appreciative of the rides to and from practice when no one was available. Surely someone could see the child behind the anger he displayed. I asked my 18 year old daughter, "What happens in school when students break the rules? Does anyone try and figure out the 'why' behind the behavior?" My daughter's response was simply, "Mommy, the school staff doesn't really care. They just want compliance, they do not try and understand what might be going on for kids."

So it goes, behavior continues to be managed with punishment and other coercive practices. It generally doesn't matter if you are in affluent areas, poor areas, rural areas or urban areas, as a culture, we have not engaged in a shift in our approach to children and behavior. Our culture is built on practices of coercion and punishment. We are failing miserably when it comes to meeting the immediate emotional and mental health needs of the students showing up in front of us. Students are pushed away by the constant practices of power and control of those in authority, systems that are intended to yield compliance, denying them a voice. They feel misunderstood, disconnected from adults and silenced. With the disconnection from relationships with adult role models and mentors, incidence of anti-social behavior increases. Violence such as bullying, harassment, self-harm/suicide and fighting increases, as does drug and alcohol use and abuse.

Improving student behavior means changing our minds about how we approach students and their behavior. Systems of punitive and coercive approaches to discipline define misbehavior as an individual choice to break the rules or challenge the expectations. The goal to manage this is to establish guilt and assign a punishment. Interventions are focused on making

misbehavior stop by use of restrictive or exclusionary consequences. These interventions are decided on by the person(s) in authority and the students' accountability is determined by receiving the punishment. These imposed punishments have the effect of shaming and stigmatizing students who have caused harm. Students are placed back into the flow of school when the consequence is served, without learning any replacement skills or in any way learning from the consequence. Repetition and increases in the undesired behavior is the result of this approach. This cycle is directly connected to increases in school conflict and violence. With the ever growing number of school shootings, we need to look inward at our practices and beliefs and embrace practices and approaches that will achieve results that meet the needs of our students.

The creation of a school environment that espouses the school as a community, supports our interconnection, a willingness to learn and grow with new ideas and perspectives and engages in reciprocal respect, is the foundation of which all else is built. From this standpoint, establishing a school approach to discipline becomes an undertaking in a core belief that we impact each other. We are responsible for our decisions, root causes of behavior are explored, we accept responsibility for our choices, provide supportive relationships to affect change and grow from the experiences.

We truly must ask why we continue down this path that is increasingly more frustrating and dangerous. Educators are leaving the profession in droves and we are losing our children because we are not evolving. Our actions and inactions are part of the problem and have unintended consequences that are ultimately destructive for our students. Change your mind, and change behavior. Our students need us.