

April 18, 2026

SUPPORTING BEHAVIORS IN SCHOOL

Creating Brain-Based Support Plans

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What is a

BRAIN-BASED SUPPORT PLAN

A framework that integrates principles from neuroscience with behavioral strategies to support learning and behavior in education settings.



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Using A Traditional Lens

ASSESSMENTS



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Using a traditional lens

ASSESSMENTS

01

Most assessments are viewing the behaviors as something the student is trying to “avoid”, “escape”, or “seek.”

02

This lens assumes willful defiance
Focuses on the behaviors we can “see” vs.
the underlying root cause

03

Conventional ways of thinking about
behavior:

- Assess the “behaviors”
- Understand the “triggers”
- “Modify” the behavior



TRADITIONAL SUPPORT PLANS

01 Contract creation of what behaviors will not happen again

03 Replacement Behaviors to teach the student

02 List of lessons to be learned to “behave better”

04 Rewards and privileges for “success” in compliance



Traditional

S U P P O R T P L A N S



1

We ask students to do things over and over that they are not able to do **yet**.

2

This is when we see “behavior.”
If the root issue isn’t solved, a different “behavior” will show up in its place.

3

We falsely interpret compliance as a resolution

WHAT ARE WE MISSING?



Shifting the lens from compliance to

NEUROSCIENCE



- 1 A Neuroscience Supported Thinking: All behavior lives in the brain.
- 2 Behaviors emerge from an adaptive survival response from our automatic nervous system
- 3 Nervous system experiences cues of threat = not safe=protection mode

Neurodivergence is the multiplier effect: When your experience is unrecognized or dismissed = trauma

The Traffic Light Nervous System

Imagine every student's nervous system has a traffic light that controls learning.



Green Light - Regulated

Brain and nervous system feel safe
Student can access learning (thinking brain is online)
Able to listen, remember, plan, and learn

Yellow Light - Stressed/Cautious/Alert

Nervous system senses pressure or overwhelm and views potential threat
Heart rate & breathing increase
Attention becomes inconsistent - distracted
Access to learning becomes more difficult - **focus is on the concern for safety and the next steps for self-preservation or survival**

Red Light - Survival Mode

Fight, flight, or shutdown response
Brain and nervous system is primarily safety rather than learning (frontal cortex is less accessible)
Directions, reasoning, and projected outcomes don't process well
Taking in new information becomes extremely difficult
Less accuracy interpreting facial cues/hearing differences (tones)

Most schools operate as if every student's nervous system is always on green



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Nervous system senses pressure or overwhelm and views potential threat
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Access to learning becomes more difficult – **focus shifts to concern for safety and the next steps for self-preservation or survival**

•Red Light - Survival Mode

Fight, flight, or shutdown response
Brain and nervous system is primarily safety focused rather than learning (frontal cortex is less accessible)
Directions, reasoning, and projected outcomes don't process well
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Shifting the lens...

GETTING CURIOUS



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Assessments

A N E U R O S C I E N C E
A L I G N E D L E N S



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Using a neuroscience aligned lens

ASSESSMENTS



- 01** Begin with the lens through how the student experiences the world
- 02** Consider the strengths of the student

Look for lagging skills, early signs of stress or overwhelm, and what supports the student needs to succeed
- 03**

“

“We don’t assess to control behavior. We assess to understand the child beneath it.”

Mona Delahooke

CONSIDERATIONS

1

If a child has faulty neuroception (incorrect detection of danger) or hypersensitive neuroception (constantly on high alert) their brain and body feeling safe at school is the top priority.

2

Remember, students cannot learn if they do not feel safe.

3

Relationships with adults are key to promoting felt safety at school

- Kids with trauma may be afraid to establish relationships
- Students living with FASD have experienced trauma

4

Developing relationships through safe and connecting activities helps with co-regulation
(vs. self-regulation)

Focus should be less on compliance, academics/learning



Assessments using a neuroscience aligned lens

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS



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Using a neuroscience aligned lens

ASSESSMENTS

1

What may be creating an ongoing sense of unfelt safety in the classroom

- Practices in place (shame-based, power-based, compliance-base)

2

Instructional methods that could be creating more stress

- Highly verbal/Visual
- High/Low structure

3

Tone of instructor voice

4

Is the instructor regulated themselves?
Regulation BEGINS with the adults in the room.



Using a neuroscience aligned lens

ASSESSMENTS

01 Patterns of behaviors vs.
single incidents

02 Sensory/Environmental
factors/Time of Day

03 Assess what the student was
expected to do right before the
behavior occurred

- Expectation/Task/Event
- Skill required-
Cognitive/regulation

04 Collaboration with the school
psychologist with assessment
results – look for the lagging
skills the student has. This will
alter your assessment lens

05 Strengths-based and student centered

From compliance to neuroscience

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS



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THE RIGHT QUESTIONS



What are the maladaptive behaviors we want to stop?



What is the threat the student's nervous system is detecting, and how is that impacting the behaviors we see?

What is the replacement or target behavior we want from the student?



What can the adults do differently to support the student in achieving the targeted behavior? (repeatedly)

THE RIGHT QUESTIONS



What should the student do to replace the problem behavior?



What skills are lagging for this student that need to be taught and supported by us?

What is the student gaining with this behavior?



What would help the student feel safe?

“

Students with learning disabilities or ADHD [or neurodivergence], when confronted with the stress created by exposure to tasks [expectations/demands] that are, in reality or in their perception, too difficult (and thus threatening), exhibit protective behavior of any organism under extreme stress: They fight, they flee, or they freeze.

-- Dr. Jerome Schultz, Ph.D.

"Nowhere to Hide: Why Children with ADD/ADHD and LD Hate School, and What We Can Do About It"



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ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Of the support plan



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Student Voice

- Is the student aware of the skills they are good at and those they are lagging?
- Have the student been given an opportunity to share what they need to feel safe?
- Has the student been asked what helps them feel good about themselves?
- Has the student been asked to share what causes them to feel stressed, upset, or angry?
- Has the student identified any triggers or situations they find challenging in the environment?
- Does the student have ideas about how teachers or staff can best support



Supports



- Are cognitive/executive functioning supports in place (visual aids, simplified instructions, etc.)
- Are there specific ways listed to change the environment to prevent behavioral escalations?
- Does the plan include helping the student identify their nervous system cues? (Neuroception)
- Is there a plan for teaching the student how to support their nervous system?
- Does the plan include co-regulation/self-regulation teaching techniques to help support the student in managing emotions?
- Are staff trained to implement the supports consistently?

Uniqueness

- Does the plan address any student sensory needs or environmental factors that are impacting the student?
- Do the interventions utilized consider the student's unique learning needs?
- Does the support plan include accommodations across *all* environments?





Relationships

- Are there trust-building activities included in the plan to support trusted relationships?
- Is there a designated educator/adult(s) for relationship building?
- Is there a plan in place for a back up adult?
- Is communication supported as part of the behavior support plan?
- How will parents be involved in implementing the plan?
- Has the student been asked who they feel most comfortable talking to when they're struggling?

CREATING THE PLAN



LANGUAGE



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LANGUAGE

- 1 Use neuroaffirming language
- 2 Clearly state the student's goals in a positive person-centered manner
- 3 Avoid framing goals in terms of "fixing" or "normalizing" behavior
- 4 Use language that emphasizes creating a supportive environment

Language



- Focus on fostering effective communication rather than eliminating atypical communication methods
- Instead of “student will” consider using terms such as “staff response” or “aide will” etc.
- Frame interventions positively, emphasizing skill-building and co-regulation.
- Avoid punitive language and practices – (reprimanding/tone shift vs teaching)

The support plan should focus on neuroscience instead of compliance

Remember:

The purpose of the behavior plan is to build skills the student needs



Prioritize

- Adult regulation
- Co-regulation
- Learn the student's body/behavior cues as they begin to escalate
- Work on helping the student identify and understand how their nervous system perceives cues of safety and threat
- Work proactively with the student – role play/scenarios/etc. utilizing the student's area of strength
- Emphasize understanding and reducing triggers rather than restraining, secluding, or controlling



A neuroscience aligned

BEHAVIOR PLAN



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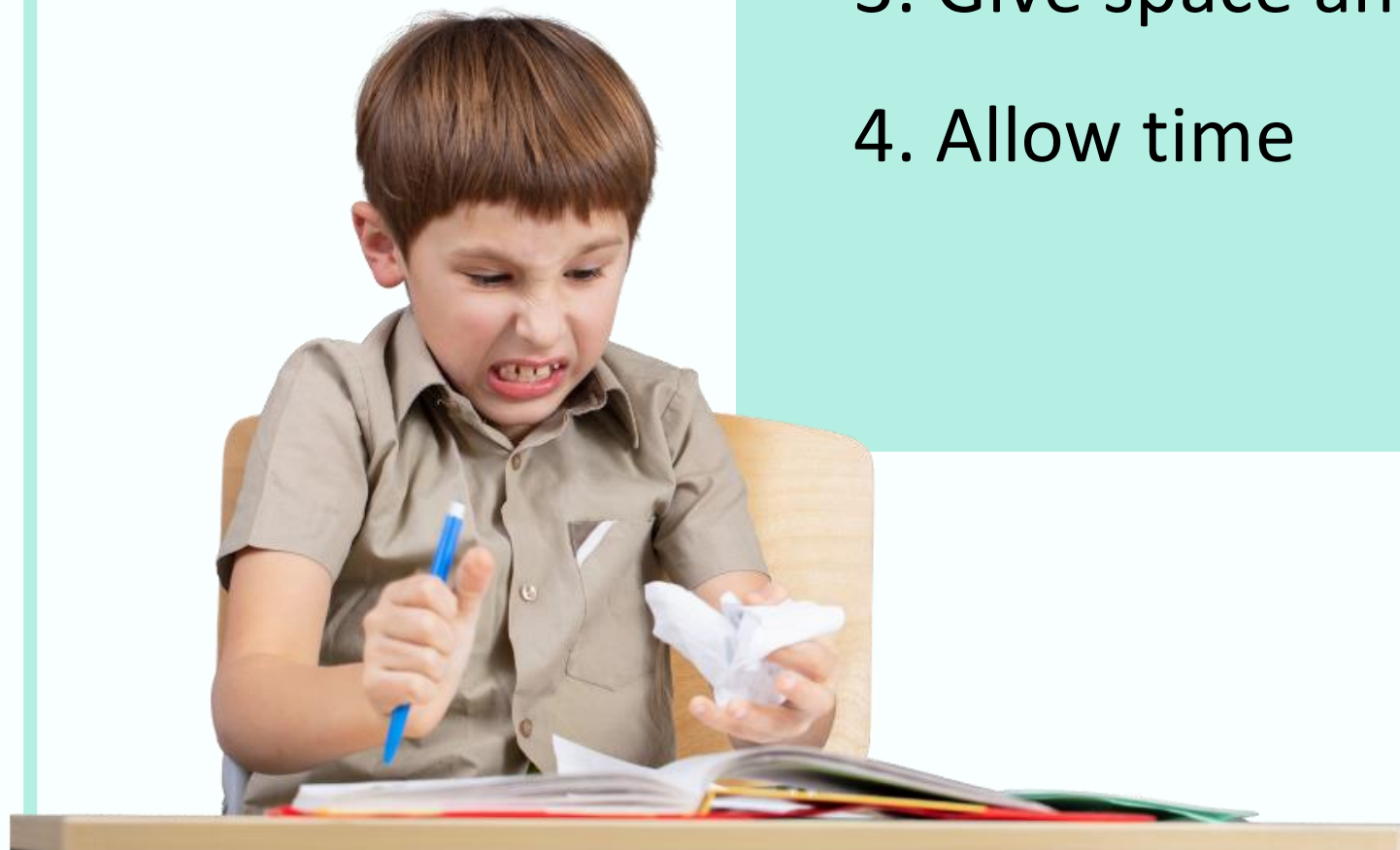
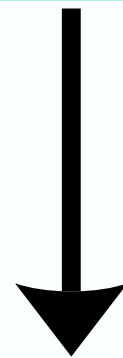
Property destruction,
physical aggression,
verbal aggression,
elopement.



When dysregulated or seeking to communicate a need, the student may repeat phrases or ideas (perseverate) and increase vocal volume. He may move toward staff or physically attempt to access a desired item, activity, or social interaction. These behaviors are signals that the student is experiencing stress, frustration, or difficulty communicating his needs effectively.



1. One-step verbal directions ("Stop! violence and threats are not tolerated").
2. Provide choices and realistic consequences
3. Give space and monitor for safety
4. Allow time



1. Staff will provide clear, calm, one-step directions using neutral, age-appropriate language that focuses on what the student should do rather than labeling the behavior. For example, staff might say, “Please keep your hands to yourself,” or “Let’s use our words to ask for what you need.” Directions will be delivered in a calm tone, with visual supports or gestures as needed, and followed by support for regulating or prompting replacement behaviors.
2. Offer clear, developmentally appropriate choices to support the student’s sense of control and decision-making, along with natural and logical outcomes that help the student understand the connection between actions and results.

3. Provide the student with physical and emotional space when needed, while monitoring for safety.

This may include:

- Allowing the student to step away from a group activity or classroom area to a designated calm space or quiet corner.
- Maintain proximity to and continue to observe and ensure the student's well-being.
- Checking in periodically with neutral, supportive language (e.g., "I'm here if you want to talk" or "Take your time, we can continue when you're ready").
- Avoiding escalating language or physical prompts unless there is an immediate safety concern.

4. Allow the student time to regulate and calm, even if this extends beyond the end of the class period. Specific strategies may include:

- Providing a designated space, quiet area, or physical outlet for the student to use as needed.
- Avoiding rushing or pressuring the student to return immediately to class activities.
- Checking in the following day using neutral, supportive language: (e.g., “How are you feeling today?” or “Let’s review what worked yesterday”), focusing on problem-solving and understanding rather than judgment. If this activates the student’s distress and dysregulation repeats, do not discuss the previous day’s events.
- Reinforcing coping strategies that the student successfully used to self-regulate.

Sleeping, drawing, and having conversations about random topics (attention seeking), a hug or fist pound

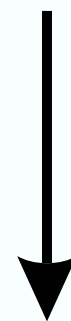


After a challenging event, student may engage in behaviors that help him regulate and process emotions, such as:

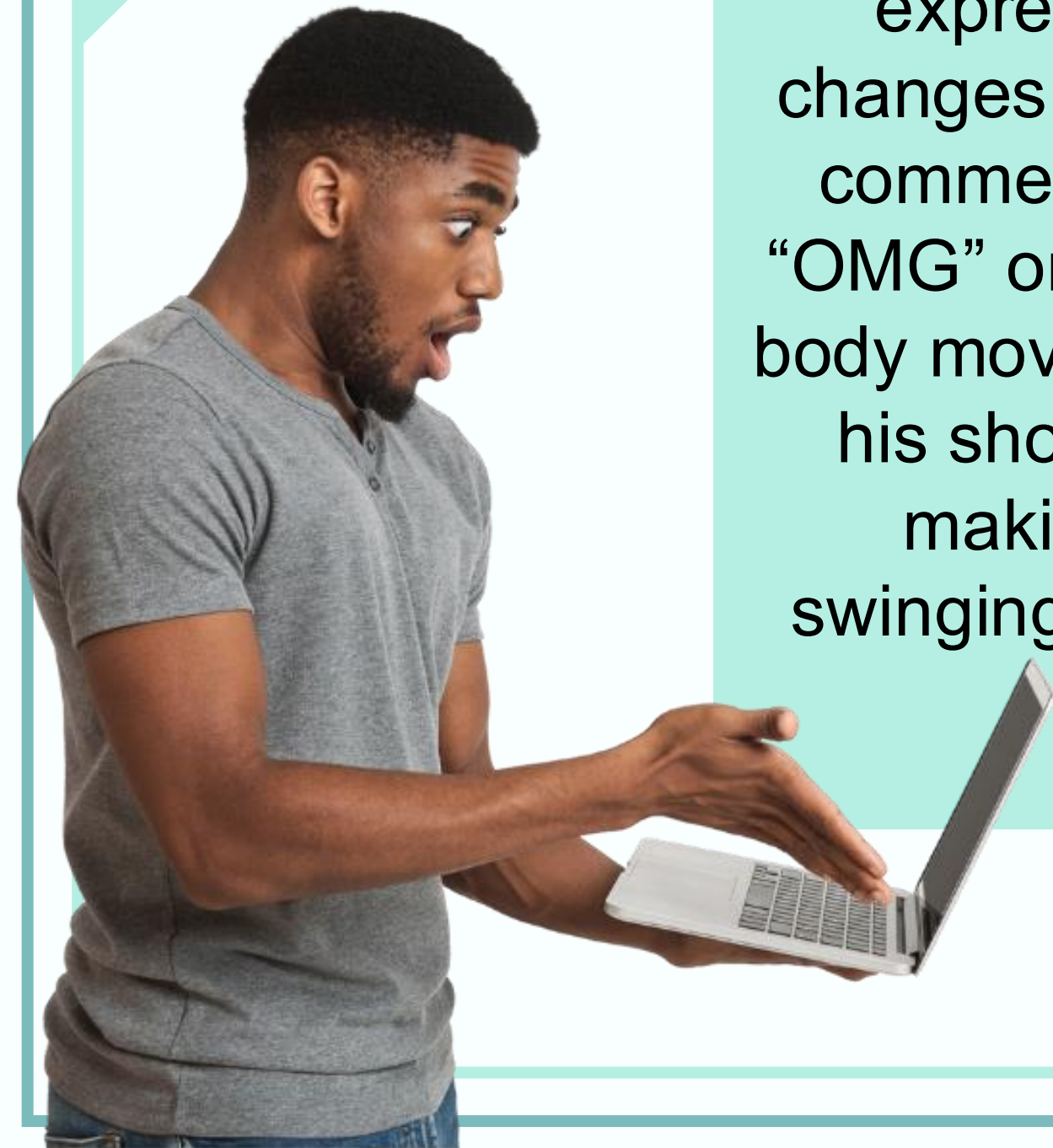
- Resting or sleeping
- Drawing or engaging in quiet activities
- Talking about varied topics
- Offering physical gestures for connection (e.g., hug, fist pound)



1. Offer choices
2. Refrain from discussing consequences until fully de-escalated
3. Ask if he is ready to talk about what happened and listen to his side of the situation/events
4. Identify and patterns or triggers that may have caused the student to escalate
5. Explore options for how to prevent triggers and what to do when triggers happen
6. Agree on support strategies
7. State consequences for behaviors



1. Offer choices. Provide the student with clear, developmentally appropriate options to support autonomy and self-regulation.
2. Refrain from discussing consequences until fully de-escalated.
3. Ask if he is ready to talk about what happened and listen to his side of the situation/events.
4. Use Active Listening: Listen attentively to the student's perspective, even if you don't agree with it.
 - Focus on Facts and Impact (Non-Blaming).
5. Identify patterns or triggers that may have caused the student to escalate.
6. Explore options for how to prevent triggers and what to do when triggers happen (i.e., what to do next me)
7. Agree on support strategies that he finds helpful.
8. Facilitate restorative practices: When ready, guide the student to repair relationships in a meaningful way.
 - Encourage a sincere apology, focusing on acknowledging impact, expressing regret and stating intent to do better.
 - Discuss actionable ways to make amends (e.g., assisting peers, restorative tasks).
 - Do not force apologies or compliance; the goal is authentic understanding and relationship repair.



Sighing, facial expression changes, making comments like “OMG” or “really!” body movement of his shoulders making a swinging motion



When dysregulated or seeking to communicate a need, the student may repeat phrases or ideas (perseverate) and increase vocal volume. He may move toward staff or physically attempt to access a desired item, activity, or social interaction. These behaviors are signals that the student is experiencing stress, frustration, or difficulty communicating his needs effectively.

1. Check in with student and ask him how his feeling or "what's going on?"
2. Empathize with his point of view by summarizing his statements ("You really wanted to go to ASES but, you're mad because you can't today"). Avoid using accusatory language, (e.g. use "I see, statements such as: "I see you haven't started your assignment; do you need help."
3. Provide him an opportunity to use a coping strategy, such as deep breathing
4. State the choices and the consequences of the choices
5. Give power to the student to make the choice for himself
6. Allow the student to vent in an appropriate area



1. Check in with the student and ask him how he is feeling or "what's going on?"
2. Empathize with his point of view by summarizing his statements ("You really wanted to go to ASES, but you're mad because you can't today"). Avoid using accusatory language (e.g., use "I see" statements such as: "I see you haven't started your assignment; do you need help?")
3. Provide him with an opportunity to use a coping strategy, such as asking him if he would like to go get a drink of water or take a walk.
4. State the choices and the consequences of the choices
5. Give power to the student to choose an outcome for himself
6. Allow the student to vent in an appropriate area (away from other students).

April 18, 2026

RECAP

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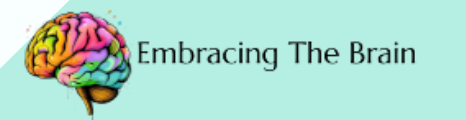
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THANK YOU

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RESOURCES

Bowman Consulting Group

Child Mind Institute

Collaborative & Proactive Solutions Approach

FASCETS Center for Neurodiversity

Mind Institute

Polyvagal Institute

Trust Based Relational Intervention

