



The Good in the Hard Moment

Understand behavior and build practical, respectful support that lasts

Look closer. Support better.

SHAD EDDIE MONGRUE

Free preview · Introduction and Chapter 1
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SHELF 32 OF 32 · BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT · CORE BOOK

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Every statistic, study finding and documented example is numbered and listed in the Sources, with a link to the page it came from. Each was checked word for word against its source in October 2026. Stories marked "composite example" are illustrations drawn from common situations; their names and details are not real people. Stories marked "documented example" come from the cited sources.

Research credits: see "Research Credits" at the back of the book. Cover and design: Shad Eddie Mongrue Books Gallery.

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An Invitation

A hard moment can make the whole room feel smaller. A child refuses to start, a student leaves the group, or someone you support raises their voice, and suddenly everyone is focused on stopping what is happening. It makes sense to want the moment to end. But it can also help to pause, when it is safe to do so, and ask a different question: What might this behavior be telling us? That question does not excuse harm or make every situation simple. It gives you a place to begin besides blame.

Behavior happens in a person's life, not in a vacuum. It can affect learning, routines, relationships, and a person's sense of belonging. A useful support framework can help you look beyond one difficult moment: PBIS, for example, is a school-based framework that offers universal, group, and individualized supports to promote positive behavior and student outcomes¹. It is a framework for organizing support, not a magic recipe or a promise that every challenge will disappear.

There is reason to take practical, positive support seriously. PBIS implementation has been associated with fewer office disciplinary referrals¹. An equity-focused PBIS approach has also been associated with reduced racial disparities in school discipline¹. These findings are encouraging, but they do not say that one approach works the same way in every setting or for every person. They do suggest that the way adults organize support can matter—and that fairness deserves attention alongside behavior.

This book invites you to trade quick labels for careful noticing. Instead of deciding that someone is lazy, defiant, or manipulative, you can describe what you actually observe and consider what was happening around it. Federal guidance recommends behavior descriptions that are observable, objective, and sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences². That shift may sound small. In practice, it can change the questions you ask, the support you offer, and how respected the person feels while you work things out.

You will not be asked to decode another person with certainty. You will learn to notice patterns, form a reasonable hypothesis, and check it against what happens next. Behavior can have several influences, and the same action may mean different things in different situations. Curiosity is not mind-reading; it is a disciplined willingness to gather clues. The goal is not to win a contest of

wills. It is to make the next useful step more possible, while protecting dignity and safety.

Progress may be uneven. A new skill can be hard to use when someone is tired, worried, overwhelmed, or facing a setting that has not changed. Support may need adjustment, and some situations call for qualified professional help. Still, small changes can make daily life more understandable: a clearer routine, a way to ask for a break, or an adult who responds steadily. Those are modest things with real meaning. They can make room for connection, learning, and possibility, even when the path forward is not perfectly smooth.

Reasons to fall in love with this subject

- **It turns judgment into useful questions** When you stop treating a behavior as a verdict on someone's character, you can start asking what happened before it, what followed, and what the person may have been trying to get or avoid. Functional assessment considers those before-and-after patterns to explore behavior's possible purpose². That does not give you instant certainty. It gives you a more respectful starting point—and a chance to respond to the need rather than simply argue with the behavior.
- **It makes the setting part of the story** Sometimes the most useful adjustment is not a stronger reminder but a change in the room, routine, or task. Noise, seating, interactions, lighting, and curriculum accessibility can all be considered when examining whether behavior occurs². That perspective is hopeful without blaming anyone: it lets you look for a practical friction point. A small change may not solve everything, but it can make success more reachable and give you clearer information about what helps.
- **It values skills, not just stopping behavior** A person may need a way to ask for help, communicate discomfort, wait, or take a break. Support can teach a useful skill that serves the same need as the behavior, rather than relying only on getting the behavior to stop². You can practice the skill when things are calm and make it easier to use in the moment. This keeps the focus on what the person can learn and communicate, not only on what others want them to stop doing.
- **It invites encouragement that has meaning** Encouragement works best when it is connected to a real effort and offered in a way the person can receive. You can notice a specific step—starting, asking, waiting, trying again—and offer feedback that respects individual preferences. Evidence-based classroom guidance recommends explicitly teaching and reinforcing

appropriate behavior³. That need not mean turning every interaction into a prize chart. It can mean paying attention to progress and making the useful skill worth repeating.

- **It asks you to protect dignity and safety** A calm, respectful response is not the same as ignoring risk. You can plan ahead, reduce avoidable pressure when appropriate, and seek trained help when a situation exceeds what you can safely manage. U.S. Department of Education guidance says physical restraint or seclusion should be reserved for imminent danger of serious physical harm when other interventions are ineffective, and ended once that danger has passed⁴. Safety planning deserves care, training, and respect for the person.
- **It makes support a shared practice** You do not have to carry every observation or decision alone. Families and school personnel can collaborate on supports that fit a student's needs⁵, while people in other settings can coordinate with their support network and relevant professionals. Clear roles help everyone know what to try and what to review. Shared practice can also reveal when a plan is working for one person but not another, so the response can be adjusted instead of repeated by habit.

BY THE END OF THIS BOOK, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO

- Describe behavior in observable, nonjudgmental terms and consider the person's strengths, communication, and context.
- Notice what happens before and after a behavior, then treat possible explanations as hypotheses to check.
- Look for changes to routines, expectations, instruction, and surroundings that may make success easier.
- Choose a useful replacement or additional skill that addresses the need the behavior may be serving.
- Practice skills with examples, opportunities to try, and feedback that fits the person.
- Offer encouragement that is specific, respectful, and meaningful rather than relying on compliance alone.
- Build a practical support plan with shared roles, attention to safety, and a way to review and revise it.

How to use this book

You can read this book in order, or begin with the chapter that speaks most directly to a situation in front of you. The chapters move from noticing and understanding behavior toward prevention, skill-building, safety, planning, and ongoing review. Each step builds on the idea that behavior is information worth considering, while also recognizing that one person's needs and circumstances are not interchangeable with another's.

As you read, choose one small idea to try rather than changing everything at once. You might write down what you observed before and after a difficult moment, adjust one part of a routine, or practice a simple way to ask for help. Include the person's perspective whenever possible. Notice what changes, what does not, and what feels respectful to them. A strategy that does not help is information too; it is a reason to reconsider the fit, not to blame the person or yourself.

If you support someone with other adults, use the book as a starting point for a shared conversation. Agree on what you are observing, who will try which action, and how you will check whether it helps. Adapt ideas to the person, setting, culture, communication, and any professional guidance already in place. If safety, health, or complex needs are involved, seek qualified support rather than treating a general book as a substitute for individualized assessment.

HOW THIS BOOK HANDLES EVIDENCE

This book is educational, not personal professional advice or an individualized assessment. Its evidence claims are cited with numbered sources, and those sources support particular findings or guidance—not guarantees that an approach will work for every person or setting. Any illustrative composite situation is fictional and is not a documented case; documented examples will be limited to details provided by cited sources. Behavior and support needs are complex, results vary, and professional guidance may be needed. The aim is to help you notice, learn, and make thoughtful adjustments with care.

The Moment Is Trying to Tell You Something

A COMPOSITE EXAMPLE · NAMES AND DETAILS ARE ILLUSTRATIVE

The classroom is nearly ready for lunch. Eli has finished two problems, but the worksheet is still open in front of him. When the teacher points to the next one, he pushes his chair back. It scrapes the floor. A pencil rolls under a desk. A few students look over.

The teacher has a choice. She can decide that Eli is being difficult and move straight to correction. Or she can pause long enough to wonder what the moment might be telling her. Is the work confusing? Is the room too loud? Is Eli worried about getting it wrong, tired of sitting, or trying to get help in the only way he knows right now?

She still needs to keep the room safe and help the class move along. Curiosity does not mean ignoring what happened. It means treating the behavior as useful information instead of a verdict on Eli's character. She lowers her voice, checks whether he understands the problem, and offers a brief chance to reset before they try again.

The moment may not resolve neatly. But the next step can begin with understanding rather than blame. That shift—small, practical, and full of respect—is where good support often starts.

Why behavior support matters

Behavior is part of how people move through ordinary life. It affects whether a student can take part in a lesson, whether a family can get out the door, whether a person can ask for help, and whether a shared space feels safe. When a moment goes badly, other people may feel frustrated or worried. The person at the center of it may be struggling too, even if the struggle is not obvious.

That does not mean every behavior has one hidden message waiting to be decoded. Sometimes the cause is plain; sometimes several things are tangled together. The useful starting point is more modest: what is happening, what might be making it harder, and what could help the next moment go better?

In elementary school settings, behavior problems are associated with lower attendance, reduced academic achievement, and greater risk for special education placement⁶. That connection matters, but it is not a reason to label a student or assume what any one behavior means. It is a reason to take everyday difficulties seriously and look for support that helps a person participate, learn, and belong.

Support is not the same as letting everything slide. You can set a boundary and stay curious at the same time. If a child throws a book, you can move people out of the way and calmly stop the throwing. Then, when the immediate moment has passed, you can ask what made the situation difficult and what skill or adjustment might help next time. Safety and understanding are not rivals.

Trade blame for a better question

Labels can feel like explanations. Difficult, attention-seeking, defiant, manipulative: each word seems to wrap up the story. But a label often hides the details you need to make a helpful choice. It can also turn a changeable situation into a fixed judgment about a person.

Try replacing the label with a description of what you could see or hear. Instead of “She was disrespectful,” you might note, “When the group was asked to put away the tablets, she said no and kept the tablet in her hands.” A clear description leaves room for more than one explanation. It also gives you something specific to compare if the situation happens again.

Federal guidance on functional behavioral assessment calls for descriptions that are specific, measurable, observable, and objective, and says they should be sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences and free from bias and judgment². That is a practical standard, not paperwork for paperwork’s sake. It helps people talk about the same event without pretending they know someone’s motives.

A useful question is not “How do I make this person stop being like this?” Try “What happened, and what support would help?” You may still need to interrupt a behavior. But you are less likely to confuse the behavior with the person, or to miss an unmet need because the label sounded convincing.

Follow the moment's clues

A simple way to get curious is to look at what came before, what the person did, and what happened afterward. Perhaps a student becomes quiet when group work begins, then leaves the table, and is sent to a quieter space. That pattern does not prove why the student left. It does suggest questions worth checking: Was the group noisy? Were the instructions clear? Did leaving make a difficult task pause?

An assessment that considers what happens before and after behavior can help identify its possible function. For example, the behavior may be connected to getting something, such as attention or access to an activity, or to escaping or avoiding something, such as a non-preferred task². These are possibilities to investigate, not proof of intent. A person can be communicating without planning a message in the way an adult might imagine.

Look for patterns across moments rather than building a theory from one hard day. Notice the time, activity, people present, instructions, and what changed afterward. If the person can describe their experience, listen. If they communicate in other ways, give those ways room too. Ask people who know the person well what they have observed, while remembering that different people may see different parts of the picture.

The point is not to become a detective who treats every pencil drop as a clue in a grand mystery. It is to slow down just enough to make a more informed next move. A hypothesis is useful when it leads to a respectful test: make one reasonable change, observe what happens, and be willing to revise your guess.

Make daily life easier to navigate

Some friction comes from the setting, not from a person's lack of effort. A crowded doorway, unpredictable transitions, unclear directions, harsh lighting, or work that is hard to access can all make participation more demanding. In school, behavioral planning may consider factors such as lighting, seating, noise, interactions, and the accessibility of the curriculum². The same habit of looking around is useful at home and in support settings.

Start with a small change that addresses something you have actually noticed. You might give a warning before a transition, show the next two steps on a simple schedule, move a seat away from a busy walkway, or offer a choice between two acceptable ways to begin. A small adjustment is not a promise that every difficulty will disappear. It is a way to make success more possible without requiring the person to carry the whole burden alone.

Keep expectations clear and realistic. If a routine is new, explain it and practice it when things are calm. If a person needs help, make asking for help an ordinary option rather than a test they must pass. If a strategy makes things harder, that is information too. Change the plan rather than insisting that the person should have responded differently.

Good support often looks less dramatic than people expect. It may be a quieter place to work, a clearer direction, a pause before a transition, or an adult who notices early signs of strain. Those ordinary adjustments can make daily routines more understandable. They can also communicate something important: you are not a problem to be managed; you are a person whose environment and support can be made more workable.

RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Research spotlight

PBIS is an evidence-based school framework that uses universal, group, and individualized supports to promote positive behavior and improve student outcomes¹. Research summaries report that PBIS implementation has been associated with fewer office disciplinary referrals¹. That is encouraging: a schoolwide approach can give adults shared ways to teach expectations and respond to behavior, rather than leaving every difficult moment to improvisation. Still, an association is not a guarantee that a particular strategy will work for a particular student. The finding does not tell you why a specific child is struggling, whether a given school has implemented the framework well, or what support an individual needs. Use broad evidence as a reason to consider thoughtful, structured support—not as a shortcut around listening, observing, and adjusting. Progress can be uneven, and a promising approach still needs to fit the people and setting where it is used.

A life example

A COMPOSITE EXAMPLE · NAMES AND DETAILS ARE ILLUSTRATIVE

A transition that keeps catching

Maya enjoys drawing after school. When her caregiver says it is time to put the markers away and start homework, Maya sometimes shouts and sweeps a few papers onto the floor. At first, the adult thinks Maya is refusing to

cooperate. The reminder becomes a debate, and homework starts later with both of them annoyed.

One afternoon, the caregiver pauses before repeating the instruction. They notice that the transition comes without warning, the table is still covered with drawing supplies, and the first homework task is not easy for Maya to begin. Those details do not prove what Maya is feeling, but they offer a few practical possibilities to check.

The caregiver tries giving a brief warning, then offers a choice: put the markers away first or place them in a tray for later. They also make the first homework step clear and stay nearby while Maya begins. The first try is bumpy. Maya still protests, and the adult has to resist turning the choice into a long negotiation. Over time, they keep what seems helpful and change what does not.

The win is not a perfectly smooth afternoon. It is a more useful understanding of where the routine gets stuck—and a way to work on it without making Maya the problem.

TRY THIS

A two-minute curiosity pause

After a difficult moment has settled, take a few minutes to notice what happened without rushing to explain it.

1. Write down what you could see or hear, using plain, specific words.
2. Note what was happening just before the moment began.
3. Record what happened right afterward, including what changed for the person.
4. List two possible explanations, and mark them as questions rather than facts.
5. Choose one small, respectful adjustment to try next time, then notice what happens.
6. If safety, health, or ongoing distress is involved, seek guidance from qualified professionals who know the person and setting.

Myths and honest truths

- **Myth:** If you look for a reason behind behavior, you are making excuses.
Truth: Understanding what may be contributing to behavior does not mean ignoring its impact. You can protect people, set boundaries, and still investigate what support could help.
- **Myth:** One difficult moment tells you what the person is trying to do. **Truth:** A single event rarely proves intent. Look for patterns, listen to the person where possible, and treat your explanation as a hypothesis to check.
- **Myth:** A good support plan should make the problem disappear right away. **Truth:** Change can take time, and a strategy may need adjustment. Notice meaningful progress, setbacks, and whether the support fits the person and the setting.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Behavior affects participation, learning, safety, and everyday routines.
- Describe what happened before deciding what it means.
- Look at context and patterns, but treat explanations as hypotheses.
- Small environmental changes can make a next step more manageable.
- Respectful support combines care, clear boundaries, and willingness to adapt.

REFLECT

1. *When someone's behavior challenges you, what label are you tempted to use—and what observable description could replace it?*
2. *What might be happening before and after the behavior, and what would help you check your ideas?*
3. *What one small change could make the next difficult moment easier or safer?*

Nine more chapters are waiting

You've read the Introduction and Chapter 1. The full 92-page book continues with:

- CH. 2 Notice the Person, Not Just the Behavior
- CH. 3 Follow the Clues in the Pattern
- CH. 4 Make the Next Step Easier
- CH. 5 Teach the Skill Behind the Need
- CH. 6 Make Encouragement Feel Real
- CH. 7 Stay Steady When Feelings Rise
- CH. 8 Learn From the Plan, Not the Label
- CH. 9 CHAPTER 9: Avoid the Traps That Wear Everyone Down
- CH. 10 Keep Growing, Together

Plus the research analysis "What the Evidence Says", a 30-day practice plan, a glossary, and every source with full research credits.

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Sources for these chapters

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