UMass Boston

ADVANCING EQUITY

Practice Brief:

Responding with Care

Learning Objectives

After reviewing this practice brief you will be able to:

1. Learn the importance of curiosity and reciprocal communication when recentering student empowerment in response to their behaviors.
2. Implement equity-focused strategies of responding with care.
3. Reflect on your past strategies and new ones that fit into your classroom's context.

Background

Traditional Practices of Responding to Students have been centered around teacher/adult perspectives, reward/punishment systems, and student accountability rather than thinking about contextual factors for a student's behavior and adult accountability.

An equity focused model is decentering the importance of responding to disruptive behaviors from students and responding to all behaviors and responding before disruptive behaviors occur.

Though an equity-focused model to responding to student's behaviors is disruptive to the traditional adult-derived rules, it is necessary when wanting to improve teacher-student and student-student relationships and improving systemic and interpersonal dynamics throughout the school community.

Reflect on how you are currently responding to disruptive behavior from your students. What strategies do you most frequently use? How do you identify harmful and/or disruptive behavior from your students? What challenges are you facing when addressing armful/disruptive behavior? Whose perspectives/voices have informed your responses to 'misbehavior'?

Key Strategies

Shifting from traditional discipline practices to an equity-focused model requires key strategies such as proactive relationship-building, understanding contextual factors influencing behavior, and incorporating student perspectives to create more inclusive and responsive approaches to all behaviors. Here are some key strategies:

A **relational approach** centers mutual understanding and trust. This strategy gives students greater opportunity to share their perspective on an incident, rather than only responding to adult interpretations of the behavior. The goal is to build a foundation of respect and empathy that can help prevent future conflicts and deepen student-teacher relationships.

Careful redirection means approaching behaviors that may escalate with curiosity and predetermined strategies agreed upon by both teacher and student. For example, a silent gesture, a light tap on the student's desk, or a hand signal can gently alert a student to disruptive behavior without calling them out or embarrassing them. These cues can be paired with an understanding that the behavior may be a communication of unmet needs—emotional, physical, or academic—that should be addressed proactively.

Teachers can also **check in** with the whole class or small groups when issues arise across multiple students. These conversations create space to address broader patterns and shared concerns, and they normalize problem-solving as a collective process rather than singling out individuals.
- **Class-wide check-ins** can reduce stigma and make students feel seen and heard.
- **One-on-one check-ins** allow teachers to connect more deeply with students and use relational strategies in a more personalized way.

Classrooms should also incorporate **preventive measures** that make expectations and supports visible and accessible to all students. Discussing with the class what tools or systems could help prevent common problem behaviors can empower students to take ownership of the learning environment. Examples include calm-down corners, snack drawers, materials stations, or baskets with fidget tools. These resources give students safe, socially acceptable ways to self-regulate before behaviors escalate, and teachers can gently redirect students to these supports when they see early signs of dysregulation.

A **careful response** to behavior focuses on repairing ruptured relationships rather than assigning blame or consequence. In an equity-focused model, the primary goal is to restore trust and connection—whether between a student and peer, a student and teacher, or a student and the broader classroom community. This involves using open-ended questions to show curiosity and empathy, giving the student space to share their perspective, and explaining the impact their behavior had on others.

Takeaways

As you reflect on how to integrate equity-focused redirection and response into your classroom, consider the following key takeaways to guide your thinking and planning:

- Reflect on Personal Alignment: Identify which strategies from the lessons resonated with or surprised you. It's also important to recognize how equity-focused approaches align with—or differ from—your current practices.
- Build on What You Already Do: Acknowledge existing practices that support equity and positive redirection. Leverage these familiar strategies as a foundation for continued growth.
- Plan for Practical Application: Choose specific strategies to implement in your classroom, prioritizing those that feel both realistic and impactful.
- Anticipate and Prepare for Challenges: Consider potential barriers to implementation (e.g., time constraints, student resistance, systemic factors). Anticipating these challenges can help you strategize solutions and ensure a smoother transition.
- Lean on Your Community: Identify supportive colleagues and staff who can collaborate with you or offer guidance. Look to those already using these approaches successfully as models or mentors.

Conclusion

Traditional behavior management practices often center adult authority, rely on reward and punishment systems, and emphasize student accountability without fully considering the broader context of student behavior or the role of adult actions and expectations. In contrast, an equity-focused model challenges these norms by shifting attention from solely managing disruptive behavior to understanding and responding to all student behaviors—proactively, empathetically, and relationally. This approach recognizes that adult accountability, cultural context, and relationship-building are essential components in creating a more just and inclusive learning environment.

While this model may feel disruptive to conventional systems of classroom control, it is a necessary shift to foster more authentic connections between students and teachers, to reduce harm, and to create a school culture where all students feel seen, heard, and supported. Reflecting on your current practices—how you respond, what behaviors you prioritize, and whose voices you center—can help identify areas for growth and guide a more equitable approach to behavior and relationship management in your classroom.