

The Dynamics of Behavior

“The disparities in disciplinary outcomes may be better explained by the behavior of teachers and principals in schools rather than student characteristics such as misbehavior, poverty, or race.”¹

Behavior must be understood in the proper context. In addition to a student’s actual behavior (objective), there is also the adults’ perception of the student’s behavior (subjective), the adult’s behavior that occurs in anticipation and in response to student behavior, and the student’s perception of the adults’ behavior. Teams that are attempting to address disparities in student discipline should recognize the following:

a. **Not all student behavior that differs from adult expectations is problematic behavior.** It is important for educators to understand the range of developmentally-appropriate and culturally-normative behaviors that occur among the students they teach. Discipline based upon the [subjective expectations](#) of teachers or administrators has been identified as a significant contributor to disparities.

b. **Behavior should be understood as a means of communication.** By understanding and addressing unmet needs that students are communicating through their behavior, adults can effectively reduce or eliminate unwanted behaviors by addressing the underlying need.

c. **Developing greater [empathy](#) and increased cultural awareness for students from diverse backgrounds helps to neutralize discipline disparities.** Family members and other adults can also assist educators to understand the meaning of a students’ behavior.

d. **Adults should understand how their behavior can trigger or reinforce student behavior.** An understanding of behavioral science principles and the application of [evidence-based approaches](#), such as the three-term contingency (antecedent + behavior = consequence), is also important to understanding problem behaviors and identifying opportunities for adults to [modify environmental factors and personal interactions](#). Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) can be done in a [brief](#) format or involve a formal assessment by a neutral observer.

e. **Disparate discipline rates reflect different responses by adults.** Numerous [studies](#) have looked for differences in the rates of student misbehavior between different groups, and significant differences in rates or severity have *not* been found.

f. **Socioeconomic status (SES) does not explain racial disparities in discipline.** Racial and ethnic disparities persist across SES groups, across schools, and over time.

¹ Welsh, R.O. and Little, S. (2018). The school discipline dilemma: A comprehensive review of disparities and alternative approaches. *Review of Educational Research: 88(5)*, 758.

