IDENTIFYING STUDENT NEEDS

NEED VS. BEHAVIOR

All behavior is an expression of need. And rather than get stuck admiring (or lamenting) the way a student is asking for that need to be met, let’s needsleuth and figure out what the underlying need is and address it head-on. Many of us have had some training in managing behavior, and we have also learned that focusing solely on behavior doesn’t really result in true change. Kids will find new ways of showing us what they need. Focusing on how they are asking is not nearly as effective as focusing on what they are needing. Kids are showing us the best way they know how to tell us that they are not okay. Often, they have never learned any different. Simply making a behavior go away doesn’t solve the problem at the origin. Thus, the key for true change is understanding the need and teaching students helpful and healthy ways to get that need met.

1. Emotional needs. These students simply struggle with regulating their bodies and getting into and staying in their upstairs brains. Often their brains are wired so that they simply cannot sit still for several minutes, their capacity to learn and focus is limited to small time frames, or they require additional support to do what is expected of the “average” student. These are students who look to us to give them tools and skills for understanding their bodies’ biology and for us to help them learn and practice ways to achieve and sustain regulation.

2. The need for a relational connection. These students look to others to help them feel safe and regulated. They rely on someone else to validate them, their feelings, and their experiences.

3. A physical need. These students don’t get enough food or healthy nutrition, they are sleep deprived, they don’t feel well, they are hot, or they are cold—something is physically disrupting their biological ability to regulate their bodies into learning-ready states.

Note: Keep in mind students who struggle with regulation often burn through more energy than others. This often requires the need for frequent nutritional refueling and brain breaks. A simple implementation of a healthy snack, an opportunity to take a quick safe break, or a simple form of regulation support can help to meet these needs and quickly get our students back into a learning-ready state.

4. A need for control. These students tend to be the most difficult for adult educators. These students have learned that they cannot rely on people and have been left to their own devices to manage and make sense of their world. These students often engage in a power struggle or crave predictability. When something unexpected happens, these students are most likely to be derailed from learning. They feel like they are powerless, or the lack of predictability associated with the experience is enough to distract them out of a learning-ready state and into a survival state.

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This has been a sampling of the content from the full Quick Reference Guide (QRG), Trauma-Invested Practices to Meet Students’ Needs by Kristin Van Marter Souers and Pete Hall.

If you would like to purchase the full QRG, you may do so at www.shop.ascd.org by searching for stock number QRG119077.