

MIKE ANDERSON

HUGGING PORCUPINES



MONTH-BY-MONTH STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT
OUR MOST CHALLENGING STUDENTS

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HUGGING PORCUPINES

PART I. Who Are Our Porcupines?

1. Who Are Our Porcupines?	3
2. Why Do Porcupines Struggle with Relationships?	11
3. Why Do Porcupines Resist Learning?	22
4. Why Do Porcupines Break Rules?	31

PART II. Hugging Porcupines All Year Long

5. Hugging Porcupines All Year Long	43
6. The Last Weeks of Summer: July and August	49
7. The First Weeks of School: August and September	62
8. The Honeymoon's Over: September and October	85
9. The Holiday Season: November and December	109
10. January Is Re-Month: January	132
11. The Winter Doldrums: February and March	147
12. The Beginning of the End of the Year: March and April	163
13. The Last Weeks of School: May and June	175

Conclusion: Hugging Porcupines Can Hurt—Do It Anyway	190
Acknowledgments	192
References	193
Index	196
About the Author	202



Who Are Our Porcupines?

James arrived in my 5th grade class one morning in early October. I knew I was getting a new student, but I had been told he would arrive in about a week, so I was surprised when he sauntered into my classroom just before other students arrived. He was tall and walked with a wide stance, feet turned slightly out and shoulders back. His head swiveled from side to side as he eyed the room incredulously. “Dude!” he bellowed. “This room is weird!”

I offered my hand. “Hi. You must be James. I’m Mr. Anderson.”

To be fair, my classroom *was* a bit weird. A circle of chairs was set up for morning meeting, which would begin as soon as students were settled. Tables were arranged around the room so that students could work together but were spaced out enough so they wouldn’t be on top of each other. A couch, donated by a family the previous year, was a perfect spot to read a book or work on some math problems with a friend. A loft flanked one side of the room. It offered a different (and fun!) workspace while also blocking the hallway that ran through our classroom—a vestige of the school’s failed attempt at the open-classroom concept of the 1970s. A few tropical plants and lamps gave the room a homey feel. Under the loft was a terrarium for our classroom’s pet king snake.

James was joining us from a classroom where students were lined up in rows, sitting in alphabetical order. He was used to a teacher’s desk at the front of the room (I didn’t have one) and rigid desk-chairs joined by the metal bar that I remember (and hated) from high school.

So his reaction to his new classroom, though a bit abrasive, was understandable. It *was* weird. His reaction became even more understandable when his father, James Sr., later told me the story of why they had moved across the country. James Jr.'s parents had just split up. His mother met someone online and announced that she was leaving. She had also stated, in front of James Jr., that she couldn't take James Jr. and his behaviors anymore and that he was part of the reason she was leaving. James Sr., not knowing what else to do, drove James Jr. and a few of their belongings across the country in his pickup truck and moved in with his mom. James Sr. told me this story as he sobbed about hitting rock bottom and losing his soulmate. I remember handing him tissue after tissue as we talked for about 45 minutes.

Unsurprisingly, James Jr. was a disaster in class. I gave him plenty of time to warm up to our classroom and the other students, letting him simply observe morning meetings until he felt ready to join. The first few days, he sat with eyes wide and arms folded protectively across his chest as students greeted each other, played fun academic games, and shared personal stories with each other. I had a few other students help James learn the routines of the room, and I spent extra time with him in each academic subject, attempting to get a sense of his academic skills and interests.

Even with this gentle guidance and support, James was exhausting. He would holler at me from across the room, "Mr. Anderson! My pencil just broke! I need another pencil!" He was sitting right near the pencil sharpener and the class supply bin of pencils. We were in the middle of a science/writing unit where we would head outside each day to write about and sketch plants and animals that we saw at the edge of our school's playground. James was terrified of writing (he was incredibly low in every academic subject), so he faked asthma attacks when we were heading outside: "Mr. Anderson! (Gasp!) I can't (Gasp!) breathe! I need to (Gasp!) go to the nurse! (Gasp!)"

Yet he was also so lovable. He could be so kind and sweet when he wasn't freaking out about something. He clearly wanted to make friends, but he didn't know how. He was funny. (And, by the way, you can't be funny without being smart.) His exaggerated facial expressions and timing when delivering a funny line were impeccable. I remember wishing I could just hang out with him and play Monopoly all day—he'd be a blast. Trying to get him engaged in math and reading was another story. He could be maddeningly defiant and shut down so quickly. He was so skilled at self-sabotage.

The most dramatic episode with James came several weeks into his tenure in our classroom. We were taking a field trip to hike a small local mountain as part of our culmination of our writing/science unit exploring

local ecosystems. I just couldn't take him with us. He was too dysregulated, and I worried that he would shut down the field trip for everyone with a meltdown on the trail. I called his father and let him know that I had a colleague who would take James in his class for the day, and that we were setting him up to have a great day. I also emphasized how important it was for James to come to school. I didn't want him to get the impression that dysregulated and outrageous behavior would result in him staying home.

The morning of the field trip rolled around. I was in my classroom, making final preparations, when James Sr. walked in, looking sheepish. He muttered, "James isn't feeling well this morning and needs to stay home sick. Could you give me his work so he can do it at home?" My heart sank, but I didn't have the time or energy to fight this battle in the moment. Students would arrive in less than 30 minutes. I was sitting with James Sr., going over some things James Jr. could do during the day, when guess who walked into the room—clearly not sick? "Come on, Dad! What's takin' you so long?"

James Sr. got visibly upset and pointed his finger at James Jr. "I told you to wait in the truck! You get back out there!" James Jr. rolled his eyes dramatically and ambled back out of the classroom.

A couple of minutes later, I was finished explaining the work to James's dad when a voice crackled on the intercom. "Mr. Anderson. There's a boy in the office crying and asking for you." I walked briskly down to the office to find James Jr., shaken and upset.

Apparently, while he was waiting in his dad's truck, he noticed that it wasn't parked squarely in the space, so he decided to fix it. The keys were in the truck, so he slid into the driver's seat, turned on the ignition, put the truck in reverse, and smashed into another car.

When James Jr. heard that the principal was calling the police to report the car accident, he thought he was going to jail. Amid this chaos, James Sr. appeared in the office. He heard what happened and bellowed at James Jr.: "That's it! I can't take it anymore! I'm sending you back to your mother!" So first his mom abandoned him, and now his dad was giving up on him. Ouch.

James struggled a lot that year, but he also made some real progress. As he learned to trust me and the other students, he let his guard down and started to accept more help. His academic skills were still lagging at the end of the year, but he made real growth. He continued to need an individualized behavior plan throughout the year, but he spent more time in the classroom and needed fewer trips to the counseling room to calm down.

James finished the school year with us, and it was tough to see him leave for the summer. He could still be a handful, but he had come so far.

I saw him three years later when our class had a reunion. We gathered one afternoon in the spring of that class's 8th grade year to reconnect and open the time capsule we'd put together in 5th grade. James attended, and he seemed to be doing well. He was playing football and doing fine in school. He was calm and relaxed.

Through the years, James was someone I often thought about. He would pop into my head at random times, and I'd wonder, "How's that kid doing?" Years later, he reached out, and we corresponded a few times via email. You'll hear about this at the end of the book.

Who Are Our Porcupines?

If you've worked with students for any significant amount of time, you've likely worked with kids like James. Throughout the course of my career, I've had many. We think about them while commuting to and from school (and often on weekends and when we're trying to sleep at night). They're often hard to engage and disruptive. They can be prickly—pushing us away as we try to get close. Or they might be quiet and withdrawn, hiding in the back of the room or covering their head with their hoods. They melt down easily, dissolving into tears or exploding in rage, seemingly out of nowhere. Yet they can also be sweet, kind, and caring. Every now and then, their defenses drop, and we see their potential. Halley, normally bristly and angry, laughs as she plays a math game with Molly. Jared, usually stoic and cold, cracks a smile at a dumb joke we drop. We bring our class to work with a group of younger students, and suddenly Susan, who usually won't cooperate with anyone, becomes a patient and empathetic tutor as she reads with a young student.

How do kids end up in this place? How do they become porcupines? There's no one profile or description that fits them all, but there are a few common reasons why kids can be prickly in school.

Trauma

A former student of mine lived on the edge of fight, flight, or freeze nearly all the time. If someone walked by our classroom, his head would pop up to see who it was, his eyes alert and wary. I'd say, "Hey, Allen" to ask him how his poetry was coming along, and he'd explode, "I wasn't doin' nothin'! You're always picking on me!" It was almost impossible for him to focus on any academic task because his radar was always on high alert, assessing everything around him as a possible threat. Once I learned about his background, I understood what was going on. He was pushed out of a moving car by his mother when he was 4 years old. By the time I had him in 5th grade, he had

never lived with any one adult for more than 10 months at a time. His mother was in and out of jail for drug use and dealing. And this was only the small part of his story that I knew. We all suspected that this was the tip of the iceberg.

Trauma has significant impacts on children's brain function and development. "Stress and trauma can adversely affect the ability to make decisions, solve problems, and set goals" (Budge & Parrett, 2018, p. 39). Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as substance abuse in the home, witnessing or experiencing domestic violence, and parental divorce (to name just a few) can have a profound impact on children's brain development. "In the midst of extreme stress, our bodies are forced to respond via a heightened state of alert known as the *fight, flight, or freeze response*. Our bodies were designed to be in that state only for brief periods and only in the face of extreme danger. But when children are exposed to acute trauma, the brain shifts its operation from development to stress response, which can have lasting repercussions" (Souers & Hall, 2016, p. 21).

Allen's outbursts weren't his fault. Just like kids who hide under desks or run away from school when overwhelmed, Allen was reacting the only way he knew how—the way his brain was programmed to respond. Erikah Messamer, a paraprofessional in Manchester, New Hampshire, describes students who are experiencing ACEs as "kids navigating adult situations and solving them with childlike solutions" (personal communication, October 11, 2024).

Let's also not forget the impacts of living in poverty. Although poverty isn't itself a trauma, it often leads to instability and a lack of basic needs being met, which can be traumatic. I've had students living in homeless shelters and in campgrounds who came to school hungry, dirty, and exhausted each morning. When students' most basic needs aren't being met—when their brains are spending almost all their energy on surviving—there's not much energy left for fractions, essays, or social studies projects.

Neurodivergence

My son has ADHD, and school was often tough. He's really smart and incredibly self-motivated, but sitting still to study for a test (that he didn't really care about) or writing an essay (that he wasn't really interested in) or filling out a physics worksheet (that he thought was pointless) was torture. He struggled to hold himself together all day and would be exhausted when he got home.

ADHD is just one of many ways our students might be neurodivergent. Autism, Tourette syndrome, processing disorder, oppositional defiance

disorder (ODD), and Down syndrome are just a few others. Some students might have other learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia. Each of these has a unique set of challenges and also gifts that don't fit neatly under one profile. Autism alone has a wide range of variations. But each of them can make school more challenging. It's hard enough for many of us to take direction and have to work on something we don't want to do, but imagine if your brain was wired for hyper self-direction, like people who have ODD or autism. Many of our porcupines have diagnosed or undiagnosed conditions that make school more challenging.

Mental Health Conditions

Jonathan Haidt (2024) makes a convincing argument that anxiety is on the rise in children in the United States and many other parts of the world. The shifting landscape of childhood, where kids spend less time in face-to-face interactions and more time online with social media, has led to a rise in many mental health conditions including anxiety. Let's also not forget that the whole world endured a trauma as we struggled through the COVID pandemic, which led many to feel increased anxiety and isolation.

Anxiety is just one of many mental health conditions we may see in our students. In my time in the classroom, I had students who were diagnosed with depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder. One student was seeing a therapist to manage panic attacks. Another was exhibiting symptoms of bipolar disorder and schizophrenia in 4th grade. His mother was told by doctors that age 9 was a bit early to officially diagnose those disorders, but he was headed in that direction. (She was already diagnosed with both.) Again, some of our porcupines may have a diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health disorder that makes interacting with peers or teachers or engaging in active and interactive learning more challenging.

Skills and Strategies That Don't Match Expectations

Not surprisingly, many kids who struggle with learning to read and write, or who struggle with number sense and other basic math skills, also struggle with behavior. It's hard to stay positively engaged in schoolwork if you're always feeling incompetent. There are other skills kids might struggle with. They might have a hard time with key social skills such as cooperation, compromise, taking turns, listening to others, or perspective taking. Or they might struggle with regulation skills such as self-control, managing impulsivity, understanding their emotions, perseverance, flexibility, or frustration tolerance.

Students might struggle with these skills for a variety of reasons. They might not have seen other people demonstrate these skills. They may

never have been taught how to do these things or been given a chance to practice. They may have even developed some coping skills that work at home but aren't considered appropriate at school. Kids might hide under furniture at home to stay safe when adults get violent. Or they may have to yell and scream to be noticed or have their needs met in a chaotic home. When viewed this way, these aren't really misbehaviors. They're strategies that don't match school expectations.

Too often in schools, kids who struggle with key skills—whether they're traditional academic ones (such as reading comprehension or writing fluency) or ones involving self-management or working with others—receive punitive feedback and consequences (poor grades and punishments) instead of supportive skill building. This all has a compounding effect. We shouldn't be surprised when some porcupines get more defensive and bristly the more they experience failure, shame, and humiliation in schools. It's one reason that middle and high school porcupines can be so much harder to work with the older they get.

Any one of these conditions can make navigating school incredibly challenging for some students, but let's not forget that some kids have multiple challenges. They may be experiencing trauma *and* have a learning disability. They may have a mental health condition *and* have not learned key skills needed for success in school. James, who you heard about earlier in this chapter, was going through multiple major life disruptions (his parents getting divorced and moving across the country), hadn't been taught many core academic and behavioral skills needed for school success, and was falling far behind academically. Is it any wonder he was a mess?

I felt for James, but I was also frustrated by him. These can be hard kids to work with. They test our patience and make us feel incompetent. They can say mean things and hurt our feelings. But they're also the ones that make this crazy profession have meaning and purpose. When we break through their defenses and help them learn and grow, we feel a rush of satisfaction. When we bump into one in the grocery store years later, and they light up and want to tell us how they're doing, we remember why we went into teaching in the first place. I'll never forget a scene from when I was student teaching. My cooperating teacher, Nancy Moretta, was an amazing educator who cherished working with the most challenging students in a high-poverty school. I marveled at the humor, patience, and genuine love she poured into her students. One day at dismissal, a young adult walked through the door. He looked like a tough customer—someone who had already lived a hard life. He entered the classroom, and Nancy lit

up with a huge smile and ran over to give him a hug. This young man had just been released from prison and was on parole, and one of the first people he wanted to visit was his former 4th grade teacher.

There are plenty of real-life stories of people who struggled in school but survived and went on to lead remarkable lives. Winston Churchill, Temple Grandin, Eddie Murphy, C. S. Lewis, David Lee Roth, Ryan Gosling, Dav Pilkey, Adam Sandler, Gillian Lynne, and Oprah Winfrey (to name just a few) all experienced huge challenges as kids yet went on to accomplish great things. They are a good reminder that neurodivergence, traumatic experiences, or even just stubbornness and mischievousness might present challenges in school, but people can always persevere and find success.

Using This Book

This book offers practical strategies and helpful insights for supporting porcupines so they can be as successful as possible, both in school and later on in life. In the rest of Part I, we'll spend time thinking about why these students struggle so much in school. Porcupines can be mystifying, especially for those of us who breezed through and enjoyed school. We'll consider the following questions: Why do they push us away when we try to get close? Why do they refuse to work on academics when learning is the ticket to a better life later on? Why do they break rules so often? We'll also explore a few of the common strategies and practices we implement with the best of intentions that don't seem to help our most challenging kids.

In Part II, we'll get into the nitty gritty work of how to support our porcupines all year long. This section is organized according to various stages of the school year. You'll learn about simple and powerful practices that you can use throughout the year to support your porcupines.

At one point during the research phase of this book, I explored the profiles and stories of famous people who struggled in school. Something that stood out to me as I read about people who overcame childhood struggles in school was that nearly all of them had at least one trusted adult who supported them and cared about them when they were young. It might have been a parent, a nanny, or a teacher. You can be that person for your porcupines. They desperately need adults who understand them, don't give up on them, and support them, even when they're at their worst.

Let's get started by deepening our understanding of why our porcupines so often struggle. We'll begin with relationships. Why do some of your porcupines struggle so much with connection, and why might they push you away as you try to get close?

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About the Author



Mike Anderson has been an educator for many years. His first and primary love was as a public school classroom teacher, but he has had many other roles as well. He has coached swim teams, worked in preschools, taught university graduate-level classes, and worked as a consultant and developer for an educational nonprofit organization.

In 2004, Anderson was awarded a national Milken Educator Award, and in 2005, he was a finalist for New Hampshire Teacher of the Year.

Now an independent education consultant, Anderson works with schools in rural, urban, and suburban settings across the United States and beyond. Anderson supports teachers and schools on the intersection of student engagement, positive relationships, and effective discipline. It is his firm belief that professional learning should be engaging and joyful and should model what great classroom teaching is all about. In 2020, he was awarded the Outstanding Educational Leader Award by NHASCD for his work as a consultant.

Anderson is the author of many books about great teaching and learning.

To learn more about Anderson and his work, visit his website: www.leadinggreatlearning.com. Through that site you can read his blog, subscribe to his newsletter, connect with him on social media, and learn about the many online courses he has created for teachers.