



Transcript- Episode 74

Behavior Charts in Disguise- And Why They Need to Go

Episode number 74. It's about behavior charts and behavior systems. Again? Some more? What?

It's probably not what you think it is.

A lot of people have heard us talking about behavior charts and said, "Well, good news, we don't use them." And that's good! It is better if fewer people are using them. But let's talk about what "them" actually means.

When you hear "behavior charts," you're probably thinking about a red light/green light system or a sticker wall. You might think, "We don't use old-school charts like that at all." But what we want you to consider is whether what you're doing might actually count in the same way.

Womp, womp, womp.

Your Dojo system, for example, might essentially be a behavior chart. So we're going to give you some simple questions to help you figure out whether you're using the kind of behavior chart we're talking about, just disguised in another form.

We're also going to tackle the biggest pushback we hear: "But kids need consequences."

Before we get into it, this is another episode where getting the handout can be really helpful. We know a lot of you are working out, driving, and doing other things while you listen, so don't worry. We'll talk you through it, too.

You can get the download at inclusiveschooling.com/download74.

The handout helps you figure out whether something you're using is actually a behavior chart. We put "behavior chart" in air quotes because these systems can take many forms. It also includes an "If you have this practice, try this instead" section, a quick look at some of the stressors behind the behaviors we're seeing, and help with talking to families about why you might be moving away from a system you've used in the past.

We'll also put links in the show notes to other episodes where we go more deeply into consequences, behavior charts, and what to do instead.

This episode is really about recognizing that we may want to give students feedback or consequences and genuinely believe we're no longer using behavior charts to do it. But when we take a closer look, sometimes we still are.

How Do You Know If It's a Behavior Chart?

There are four big indicators.

1. Is it public?

Can other students see it or hear it? For example, a teacher might say, "I really like how Kristie is sitting crisscross applesauce."

That publicly tells everyone that Kristie is doing a great job. It also publicly communicates that other students are not.

If a child's internal state or behavioral level is visible to the group, we would call that public. And we'd say it's time to stop using it.

2. Is it one-size-fits-all?

Is it a class-wide or school-wide system that assumes all kids regulate in the same way? Does everybody get the same rewards, class-wide targets, universal clips, cubes, stars, marbles, or whatever the system happens to use?

If every student is expected to respond to the same system in the same way, we'd say: Bag it.

We know this can raise questions for schools using PBIS or Teaching Pyramid. We'll put a link in the show notes to some frequently asked questions about our humanistic, brain-based approach to behavior and how it relates to PBIS and Teaching Pyramid.

When we talk about problematic one-size-fits-all systems, we're not saying that having school-wide or class-wide supports is inherently harmful. We're talking about using universal systems in ways that don't account for individual differences in regulation and behavior.

3. Is it highly symbolic?

Does the system rely on colors, tokens, points, paws, stars, clips, rainbows, glitter, unicorns, or other symbols? Even if they're nice symbols. Even if they're pretty unicorns in pretty colors.

For a young child or a dysregulated child, we're asking them to think, "Okay, wait. Two unicorns equals a pizza party on Friday."

That's highly symbolic and confusing. We're asking students to interpret symbolism in ways that can be very cognitively taxing, if not impossible.

These systems also frequently involve delayed gratification. Maybe next Thursday, because there's no school Friday, you're going to get a party because you behaved well two Tuesdays ago.

That's an enormous cognitive leap, particularly when behavior is often not a choice. It's a nervous system response.

All of this keeping track of points, stars, glitter, and unicorns may be well-intentioned. But we're creating a system around behavior that may not have been a conscious decision by the student in the first place.

That's why we encourage educators to look closely at their systems. We often hear, "Oh, we're not using behavior charts anymore."

Then we look at the system. It's public. It's one-size-fits-all. It's highly symbolic. It may not look like an old-school behavior chart, but it's functioning like one.

4. Does it use shame, comparison, or competition?

The fourth indicator is whether the system attempts to shift behavior through shame, comparison, or competition. Most of these systems communicate what's good and bad, who's right and wrong, and who's on track and off track.

Yes, we teach kids concepts of right and wrong all day long. But when we use a standardized system, there are students with certain disability labels who will consistently be "off track." They will consistently be positioned as being in the wrong.

That's a very ableist way to think about what is "right" and "wrong" in school.

Growing up with significant ADHD in a school system that used these kinds of systems all the time, I was constantly below board. I remember this ship system where I was below board all the time. I was on red often. I wasn't the student with quiet hands and quiet feet.

The things being publicly displayed as problems were often simply my nervous system managing in a classroom.

What I learned from those systems was that I was wrong. I was problematic. My body itself was wrong because I needed to move. I needed to try harder and do better.

That's what a system based on shame and comparison can do. It takes one standardized way of being and communicates, "You are not standardized. Therefore, you are wrong, bad, or not deserving of the double unicorn."

And yes, we're apparently very into double unicorns today.

How Do We Talk About This With Families?

The handout also includes a guide that can help explain why you're not using behavior charts and what you're doing instead.

And while we designed it with families in mind, it doesn't have to be just for families. If you're a school leader, you could use it to start a conversation with your staff. If you're co-teaching, you could use it to talk with your co-teacher about why you're moving away from these practices.

The guide boils the concerns down to four big ideas.

First, behavior charts can publicly display a child's struggles and/or disability. When that happens publicly, it can create a shame-based experience for students.

Second, young children may not understand highly symbolic color systems and delayed gratification.

Third, behavior charts don't teach self-regulation. We can spend a tremendous amount of time and energy managing the chart itself, who's doing what, who's where, who earned what, instead of teaching actual self-regulation through co-regulation.

And fourth, our goal in schools is belonging, not compliance.

We need systems that build trust between teachers and students. Shame-based systems are one of the worst ways to build that trust.

So What Do We Do Instead?

This is the important part. Moving away from behavior charts doesn't mean we stop giving students feedback, boundaries, or support.

We can use private check-ins. We can co-regulate and help students return to a regulated state. And when we talk about "calm," we don't mean everyone needs to be sitting perfectly still saying "om." We're talking about returning to homeostasis.

We can establish routines and use visual supports. We can reduce stressors. We can teach emotional literacy when students are regulated. And we can provide logical and immediate consequences, which we think about as feedback.

We have other episodes that go much more deeply into what these practices look like, and we'll link those in the show notes.

But we wanted one episode that made something very clear: Behavior charts aren't just the obvious charts.

If your system is public, one-size-fits-all, highly symbolic, or shame-based, it's worth taking a closer look and moving away from it.

And that doesn't mean chaos.

When someone says, "Kids need consequences," here's the truth: They need feedback. They need boundaries. They need follow-through. They don't need to be humiliated to understand them.

As always, we want you to keep leading with dignity, equity, and belief in every single learner.

SHOW NOTES

In this episode, Julie and Kristie share four simple questions to help you recognize when a behavior system may still be built around compliance, comparison, or shame — and what to think about instead.

Key Takeaways

- Behavior charts aren't always obvious. Digital systems, tokens, points, and public rewards can function in similar ways.
 - A behavior system deserves another look when it is public, one-size-fits-all, highly symbolic, or based on comparison.
 - Behavior charts may track behavior, but they don't necessarily teach students what to do when their nervous system is overwhelmed.
 - Moving away from behavior charts doesn't mean removing expectations, boundaries, or consequences.
 - The goal is to help students build regulation, connection, and belonging, not simply compliance.
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Answering a Common Question

How do you know if you're using a behavior chart in disguise?

Start with four questions:

1. Is it public?
2. Is it one-size-fits-all?
3. Is it highly symbolic?
4. Does it rely on shame, comparison, or competition?

If you're answering yes, it may be time to look more closely at what the system is actually teaching students.

Episode Download / Handout

Bagging Behavior Charts: A Practical Toolkit for Creating Connection-Based Classrooms

This 7-page toolkit helps you identify behavior charts in disguise and gives you practical alternatives for supporting behavior without relying on public tracking, rewards, or shame.

You'll get:

- A quick “Is This a Behavior Chart?” decision guide

- A Behavior Chart Swap Sheet with better alternatives
- A guide to the four stressor domains that may be underneath behavior
- A ready-to-use family guide explaining why your classroom or school doesn't use behavior charts

👉 Download at: inclusiveschooling.com/download74

Practical Moves to Try

- Keep feedback private rather than publicly tracking behavior.
 - Look for the stressor underneath behavior before assuming defiance.
 - Use co-regulation during escalation and teach regulation skills later.
 - Replace delayed rewards with immediate, meaningful feedback.
 - Examine whether classroom routines, expectations, noise, pace, or tasks need adjusting before trying to change the student.
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Additional Resources

Comparing Approaches to Support Challenging Behavior: This comparison guide helps you see how the **Pyramid Model**, **PBIS**, and **Behavior 360** approach challenging behavior — and where they overlap. It also clears up common misconceptions about PBIS and the Pyramid Model while showing how Behavior 360 can help bridge the gap between what teams believe and what adults actually do in the moment.

Inclusion Podcast Episode 35: Why Behavior Charts Fail and What to Do Instead: In this episode, Julie and Kristie unpack why public behavior charts, clip systems, rewards, and consequences can create compliance without actually teaching the skills students need. You'll hear practical ways to **work with students instead of “working on” them**, respond privately in the moment, and shift the focus from fixing the child to creating classrooms built around connection, regulation, and belonging.

Join thousands of educators making inclusion work.

CATCH THE LATEST EPISODES OF THE INCLUSION PODCAST

