

Help for Struggling Students



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As a K–3 special education teacher, I’ve learned that some of our students struggle loudly—and some struggle quietly. And sometimes, they struggle in that in-between space: big enough behaviors that everyone notices... but not yet formally supported by a Tier 2 or Tier 3 plan.

If you’re a parent or teacher seeing behaviors that clearly need more than just reminders and redirection—but there’s no formal intervention plan in place yet—this post is for you.

Some behaviors don’t quite fit into “typical classroom challenges,” but they also don’t yet have a formal Tier 2 or Tier 3 plan attached to them. As parents and teachers, that in-between space can feel frustrating and uncertain. We know a child needs more support—but we’re still waiting on meetings, data, or next steps. The good news? We don’t have to wait for paperwork to begin helping. There are practical, proactive strategies we

can start right away to support students who need more structure, regulation, and skill-building.

First, Let's Ground Ourselves in MTSS

In a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), Tier 1 is what all students receive: clear expectations, consistent routines, and positive reinforcement. Tier 2 provides targeted, small-group or structured supports. Tier 3 is individualized and intensive. But here's the reality: sometimes there's a lag between recognizing a need and having a formal Tier 2 or Tier 3 plan written and implemented. During that gap, kids still need support. And we can give it.

Step 1: Shift from "Why are they doing this?" to "What is this behavior communicating?"

Behavior is communication. A child who refuses work may be saying:

"This feels too hard."

"I don't know how to start."

"I'm overwhelmed."

A child who disrupts may be saying:

"I need attention."

“I need movement.”

“I feel out of control.”

Instead of reacting to the surface behavior, we respond to the unmet need underneath it.

Step 2: Increase Structure Immediately.

Students who likely need Tier 2 or 3 supports almost always benefit from more structure—not more consequences.

Try:

- Visual schedules (even simple sticky note checklists)
- First/Then language (“First math, then drawing.”)
- Clear start and finish markers
- Breaking work into smaller chunks
- Timers for both work and breaks

Structure lowers anxiety. Lower anxiety lowers behavior.

Step 3: Pre-Teach Expectations.

Many of our students who struggle behaviorally don’t lack motivation—they lack clarity. Before a known trigger (recess, transitions, group work), preview expectations:

“When we line up, our hands stay by our sides.”

“During centers, we use quiet voices.”

“If you feel frustrated, you can raise your hand or use your break card.”

Role-play it. Practice it. Reinforce it immediately when you see it.

Step 4: Increase Positive Feedback (More Than Feels Natural).

If a student is likely headed toward Tier 2 or 3, they are often hearing more corrections than praise.

Flip the ratio.

Catch:

The 30 seconds they stayed in their seat.

The one safe choice they made.

The moment they tried again.

Specific praise builds replacement behaviors:

“I noticed you started even though it felt hard.”

“You kept your hands safe.”

“You asked for help instead of shutting down.”

We grow what we notice.

Step 5: Offer Regulated Breaks Before Escalation

If you wait until the meltdown, you're too late. Build proactive regulation:

- Scheduled movement breaks
- Sensory tools
- Calm-down corners
- Short "jobs" that reset the nervous system

At home, this might look like:

- Heavy work (carrying laundry, pushing a vacuum)
- Outside time
- A quiet reset space
- Regulation first. Instruction second.

Step 6: Start Simple Data Collection

Even without a formal plan, start noticing patterns:

- When does it happen?
- What happens right before?
- What happens right after?

You don't need fancy charts. Sticky notes work. This information helps teams move toward Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports faster—and more effectively.

For Parents: You're Not "Behind."

If your child doesn't yet have a formal behavior plan but clearly needs more support, you are not failing. Schools move through processes. Sometimes they move slowly. Ask:

"What Tier 2 supports can we try?"

"Can we start Check-In/Check-Out?"

"Can we monitor behavior for a few weeks?"

Advocacy doesn't have to be confrontational. It can be collaborative. Some behaviors don't quite fit into "typical classroom challenges," but they also don't yet have a formal Tier 2 or Tier 3 plan attached to them. As parents and teachers, that in-between space can feel frustrating and uncertain. We know a child needs more support—but we're still waiting on meetings, data, or next steps. The good news? We don't have to wait for paperwork to begin helping. There are practical, proactive strategies we can start right away to support students who need more structure, regulation, and skill-building.