



Why We're Still Getting "Bad Behavior" Wrong

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Every time we label a child's meltdown as "bad behavior," we fail them. And we're failing a lot of kids.

For decades, we've been stuck in a damaging cycle—seeing challenging behaviors as defiance, laziness, or attention-seeking instead of what they truly are: dysregulation. The cost of getting this wrong is staggering: burned-out staff, broken families, and kids funneled into systems of punishment instead of pathways to healing.



But this issue runs far deeper than the behaviors we see on the surface. Dysregulation is often rooted in layers of complexity—trauma, emotional vulnerability, and even the unaddressed wounds and skill deficits of the adults responding to it. If we want to change the outcomes, we must first understand what's really going on.

The Myth of "Bad Behavior"

The term "bad behavior" is a convenient shorthand, but it's also incredibly harmful. It oversimplifies complex emotional and psychological dynamics and creates ineffective consequences that waste time, energy, and resources without improving outcomes.

Kids don't act out because they want to make life harder for the adults around them. They act out because they lack the tools to cope with overwhelming emotions, unmet needs, or the chaos happening inside them.

For some children, the challenge goes even deeper. Emotional vulnerability—whether due to biology, temperament, or past experiences—makes their feelings bigger, their reactions stronger, and their need for understanding greater. These are the kids who feel the small stuff like it's the end of the world. When adults don't understand this sensitivity, these kids are often labeled as dramatic, manipulative, or troublemakers.

Instead of recognizing their vulnerability, we vilify it. We pathologize their big emotions instead of validating them, and in doing so, we erode trust. Without trust, there's no foundation for skill-building, and without skills, these kids remain stuck in cycles of dysregulation that affect every aspect of their lives.



The Role of Trauma—Both Theirs and Ours

Trauma is a major driver of dysregulation, but it's not just the child's trauma that matters. The unaddressed trauma and emotional intelligence (EQ) skill deficits of adults play a critical role, too.

Adults bring their own unresolved experiences, biases, and stress to the table. When faced with a child's dysregulation, an adult who hasn't worked through their own triggers or received intensive training is far more likely to escalate the situation, react punitively, or misinterpret the child's behavior.

This cycle of mutual dysregulation—where the adult's unresolved trauma feeds into the child's emotional struggles—doesn't just harm relationships. It perpetuates the very dynamics we're trying to change. Until we address the emotional health of the adults in a child's life, we can't truly support the child.

Why Validation Matters More Than You Think

Understanding the roots of dysregulation is important, but how we respond to it is everything.

Validation is a powerful tool that's often misunderstood or overlooked. It's not about agreeing with a child's behavior; it's about acknowledging their feelings and experiences. When we validate a child's emotions, we send a critical message: "I see you. I hear you. You're not alone."

For emotionally vulnerable kids, this validation can be transformative. It helps them feel safe, reduces the intensity of their emotions, and builds the trust necessary for them to start developing coping skills. Without validation, kids learn to hide their feelings or lash out in bigger ways to be heard. Neither leads to growth or healing.

When we validate, we create space for connection and skill-building. When we invalidate—by dismissing, punishing, or shaming—we create distance and deepen the child's dysregulation.



What We're Getting Wrong—and How to Fix It

Here's the hard truth: the way we respond to dysregulation is often just as dysregulated as the kids themselves.

Adults get frustrated, overwhelmed, and stuck in cycles of reacting instead of responding. We yell, we punish, we label—and in doing so, we mirror the very behaviors we're trying to stop. Why? Because we were never taught better. Most professionals, from teachers to social workers, weren't trained to understand dysregulation. And without those tools, we default to control instead of connection.

Control doesn't teach kids how to manage their emotions. It teaches them that their emotions are something to fear.

The solution isn't more control—it's more understanding. By recognizing dysregulation for what it is, we can begin to respond with strategies that actually work:

- Trauma-sensitive approaches: Meeting kids where they are, not where we think they should be.
- Validation and trust-building: Creating environments where kids feel seen and safe.
- Emotional regulation tools: Helping both kids and adults navigate big emotions effectively.



The Stakes Are High—But So Are the Rewards

When we fail to address dysregulation effectively, the costs ripple out. Kids internalize shame and feel alone in their struggles. Families break under the pressure. Staff burn out from trying to manage behaviors they don't understand. And systems—schools, juvenile justice, healthcare—bear the long-term consequences.

It highlights how dysfunctional many of our policies and protocols are when we continue to repeat the same ineffective systems we inherited. At some point, if we say we truly want to make a difference, we have to be willing to disrupt the very systems and procedures that contribute to the problem.

But when we get it right? Everything changes. Kids learn to trust and regulate. Families heal. Staff feel empowered and supported. Systems shift from punitive to restorative.

This work isn't easy. It requires humility, grounding in evidence-based practices, and reflecting on our own role in it. But it's worth it—because the most vulnerable kids deserve our best.

It's time to stop calling it “bad behavior” and start seeing it for what it is: a call for connection, compassion, and change.

Want to Learn More About Dysregulation?

1. Join Our Free Emotional Regulation Workshop—Gain actionable insights and practical tools to better understand and address dysregulation. Perfect for professionals looking to make an immediate impact. [Watch now!](#)

2. Enroll in Our Most Popular Course: Dysregulated—A comprehensive, easy-to-implement training designed to equip professionals with the skills they need to transform challenging behaviors into opportunities for growth. [Get started now!](#)

3. Bring Dr. Jennifer Ulie to Your Organization—Schedule a professional development session tailored to your team's needs, led by an expert with over 15 years of experience in dysregulation and trauma-sensitive strategies. [Learn more.](#)