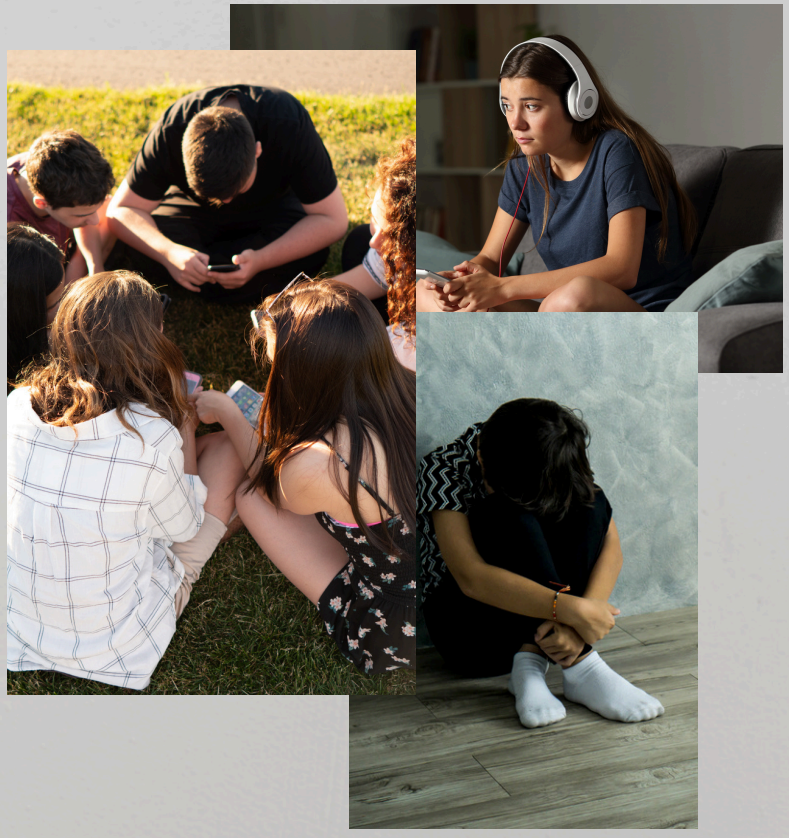



Beyond the Behavior

A Practical Guide to Understanding and Responding to Teen Behavior

Deb Talks Truth

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What is this behavior telling me?

If you have spent any time with teens, you know that their behavior can catch us off guard. It can confuse us, frustrate us, or make us feel helpless.

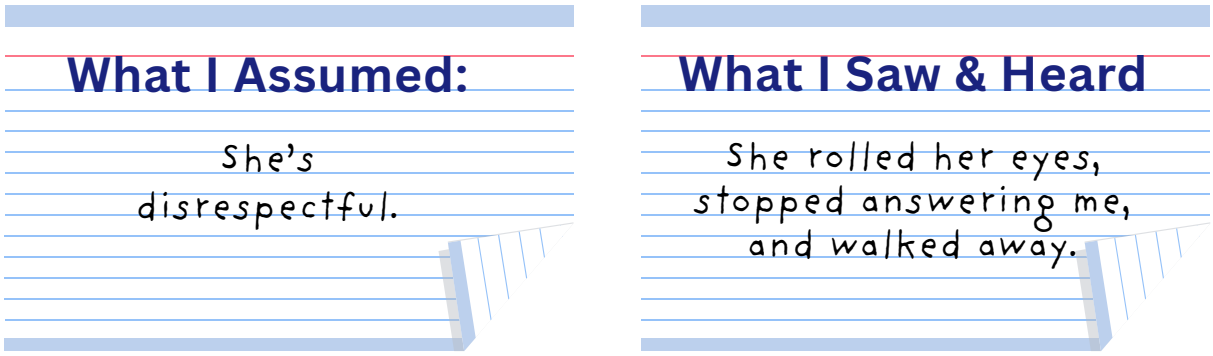
In those moments, it is easy to focus only on the behavior. But behavior can actually give us information and clues about what may be going on with teens.

This guide will help you pause before you react, look beyond the behavior, and think intentionally about how you respond. We'll walk through five steps.

1. Start with What You See and Hear

What actually happened?

This is your fact-gathering stage. Try to separate what you observed from how it made you feel.



The first is an interpretation. The second names what was actually observed. The first carries emotion and judgment, while the second doesn't.

What did I actually see or hear? *Be as specific as possible.*

What is this behavior telling me?

2. Look Beyond the Behavior

As adults, we naturally want to take action. We want to change behavior we don't like and immediately ask **"How do I stop this behavior?"**

But what would happen if we slowed down and asked ourselves,

"What might this behavior be telling me?"

Could this teen be...

Feeling overwhelmed? Embarrassed? Anxious? Frustrated?

Unsure how they are feeling or how to communicate it?

Testing a boundary?



Trying to look cool in front of their peers?

Needing some control?

Reacting to something I don't know about?



Understanding behavior doesn't mean excusing behavior.

It means you are willing to ask questions, consider more than your own interpretation, and seek to know the teen better. You can explore what may be underneath the behavior while still maintaining boundaries and expectations. You pause and consider before you act.

From what I know about this teen, what might be under this behavior?

What is this behavior telling me?

3. Check Yourself Before You Respond

Before I respond, am I...



feeling frustrated or annyoed?
embarrassed?
taking this personally?
trying to maintain full control?
stacking past emotions with this teen?



What I bring into the interaction matters, too.

How do I want my response to impact my relationship with this teen?

What do I need to do to respond intentionally, not just emotionally?

What is this behavior telling me?

4. Decide What This Specific Moment Needs

What can make things challenging is that not every behavior or every teen needs the same response. This is why it is essential to consider what this particular moment and teen may need. It may be more than one thing.

A Boundary
Does the teen need an expectation or boundary communicated and reinforced?

Space
Does the teen need space because they are not ready to have a conversation? Do you need the space? Or do you both need it?

A Conversation
Does the teen need to be seen and heard? Do they need a chance to vent? Do they want to connect through conversation?

Truth
Is there something that needs to be addressed directly and honestly before your relationship can move forward?

Support
What type of support may need to be put in place for the teen to be able to handle what is being asked of them?

A Fresh Start
Does this teen need to know that they can move on from their mistakes and you won't hold it against them?

What does this specific moment need from me?

What is this behavior telling me?

5. Return to the Relationship

After the behavior, what happens next?

When we work with teens, the goal isn't to simply stop a behavior. We want to help teens build the skills they need to handle difficult moments differently the next time. And we want to respond in a way that allows the relationship to continue and grow.

A difficult moment or interaction doesn't have to define your relationship with a teen. Honestly, it shouldn't.

How do I communicate to this teen that I see them as more than their behavior and that our relationship still matters?

When behavior catches you off guard, and it will, remember to



1. Focus on the facts.
2. Look beyond the behavior.
3. Check yourself before you respond.
4. Decide what this specific moment needs.
5. Return to the relationship.

Keep Showing Up & Keep Caring

One thing that is hard for us as adults to remember is that just as teens are figuring things out as they go, so are we. You won't get it right every time with a teen. It takes practice. It takes a perspective shift sometimes. And it takes a commitment to keep showing up and to keep caring. Being intentional will help us stay focused on the teen, not just the behavior.

About Deb



Deb brings nearly 30 years of experience working with teens and supporting the adults who walk alongside them. Her work has taken her into schools, churches, juvenile corrections, Job Corps, and community programs. As a Youth Development Specialist, she understands teen behavior, relationship building, and youth development. Deb helps adults better understand teens and build relationships that matter.

Want to keep learning together?

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