

Understanding Behavior of Newcomer Children and Youth in the Classroom

Description

This reference table is designed to help educators understand common classroom behaviors displayed by newcomer children and youth. The table below highlights behaviors that are often misidentified and identifies possible underlying causes, to support educators and providers in promoting more culturally responsive and trauma-informed interpretations.

Behavior	Often misinterpreted as...	Possible Cause
Easily distracted, not on task, difficulty focusing	“Misbehaving”, “attention problems”, “low effort”	Impacts of trauma, anxiety, or depression on concentration; intrusive thoughts; financial stressors
Appearing withdrawn or quiet and avoiding eye contact	“Rude”, “disengaged”, “shy”, “dishonest”, “defiant”	Trauma-related hypervigilance, limited confidence in English, cultural norms
Difficulty remembering things, not following directions, asking repeated questions	“Low motivation”, “learning disability”	Impacts of trauma, anxiety, or depression on memory; difficulty processing new information; Limited English language proficiency
Multiple unexplained or unexcused absences	“Low motivation”, “not caring about school”, “low family engagement”	Somatic/physical symptoms, avoidance, transportation barriers, helping parents with interpretation or caregiving, housing instability
Jumpy, flinching at bells, avoiding loud peers	“Overreacting”, “clowning around”	Hypervigilance, past exposure to violence or dangerous environments or people
Falling sleeping in class or keeping head down on desk	“Low motivation”, “rude”, “lazy”	Impacts of trauma or depression on sleep, and energy level; working evenings to support family

Behavior	Often misinterpreted as...	Possible Cause
Having few friends, spending time alone or only with peers from the same background	"Lack of interest in making new friends"	Language and cultural barriers, limited social skills, impacts of trauma or depression, guilt about leaving friends and family behind
Not completing homework	"Defiance", "lack of interest in education", "low effort"	Language barriers, family obligations, lack of quiet study space, not understanding expectations, impacts of trauma or depression on concentration or memory
Separation anxiety and clinging to parents or trusted adults especially at morning drop-off	"Immaturity", "being spoiled", "not learning independence"	History of loss or traumatic separation, history of disrupted attachment, fear of losing loved ones
Difficulty trusting adults	"Resistance to services", "opposition", "poor attitude"	Negative past experiences with authority figures, family separation, trauma-related mistrust
Constantly scanning the room, looking around at others	"Distractibility", "inattention", "cheating"	Hypervigilance, scanning for danger, feeling unsafe
Being highly responsible, appearing perfect	"Maturity", "competitive"	Role reversal or parentification, anxiety, fear of failure, pressure to succeed on behalf of family
Aggression or fighting	"Conduct problems", "defiance"	Survival behaviors, difficulty regulating emotions due to chronic stress
Frequent visits to the nurse's office	"Avoiding classwork"	Somatic/physical symptoms of trauma, anxiety or depression