



The
Behavioral Science
ToolKit



EveryDay Labs™

The role that school districts and educators play within their communities is more critical and central than at any other time in our nation's history. Schools were established to provide students with an opportunity to learn necessary academic concepts and skills. Over the past generation, the function of schools has expanded well beyond academics: they have become the primary institution tasked with ensuring that students develop socially and emotionally in order to become productive members of society; they are the most common point of access to important health and nutrition resources and other support services for students and families; and, ultimately, they are responsible for ensuring that students have the college and career readiness skills to meet the demands of post-secondary life.

This is a tall order. The demands placed on our school systems and educators to meet this ever-growing list of goals is nearly inconceivable. And yet, due to local emergent issues while in the midst of an unprecedented global health crisis, expectations placed on schools continue to mount despite ever-shrinking budgets and limited resources.

Research has shown that partnering with families and students is crucial to a district's success across grade levels, disciplines, programs, and student outcomes. Therefore, finding strategies and tools that are high-impact and low-burden to support schools and districts in productively communicating with families can help maximize the effectiveness of educators' time, outreach, and resources.



This ToolKit is divided into four parts:

1. What Is Behavioral Science?
2. Best Practices from Behavioral Science
3. Using Behavioral Science to Improve Family Communication and Student Outcomes, Well-Being, and Success
4. EveryDay Labs: Harnessing the Power of Behavioral Science

This ToolKit is designed to provide district leaders with an overview of behavioral science—specifically, an understanding of how people think, behave, and make decisions—and how this information can be used to effectively implement scalable and cost-effective strategies that improve family engagement and promote positive student outcomes and overall student well-being and success.

PART 1 What Is Behavioral Science?

Behavioral science is the study of when and why people engage in certain behaviors, taking into account the influence of factors such as habits and routines, motivation, and influences from others. Contrary to previous theories that assumed human beings always act rationally and in their best interest, behavioral science draws from several academic disciplines, including economics, psychology, and neuroscience, and recognizes that human behavior and decision-making are the result of subjective factors including context, how information is delivered, and other variables that influence a person's overall understanding and perspective.

Terms, Concepts, and Basic Principles

Social Norms are unwritten rules of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are considered acceptable. These informal rules often govern how people behave in different situations because they naturally conform to what is considered to be normal or acceptable. Common social norms include greeting someone upon meeting them, forming a line while waiting, and providing personal space in public areas.

Choice Architecture describes the concept that decisions are influenced by the way choices are presented. This can include the layout of choices, the sequence of options, and the range of choices offered. For example, items placed at eye-level in a store are purchased more frequently. And opt-out programs where people are automatically registered but given the option to opt out see much higher participation rates than those that require a person to initially opt in.

Nudges are an unobtrusive way to gently encourage people to make a particular decision. A nudge can be any subtle influence from the environment that piques interest or catches one's attention and works to change a their behavior or decision. Nudges often use choice architecture to help draw a person's attention to key information or to frame an issue in a particular way. Nudges gently lead a person to make a particular decision on their own, rather than explicitly persuade or tell them what to do.

Anchoring refers to the observed behavior that when a person is initially exposed to one piece of information, usually a number, that information becomes a reference point for decision-making about subsequent numbers, prices, or future estimates, even when the initial information is actually irrelevant or unrelated. This cognitive bias means that rather than objectively understanding new information, a person interprets it relative to the initial information or "anchor." This phenomenon is often observed in sales: when a high price is initially shown for an item, the customer's sense of a fair price shifts upward.

Reciprocity refers to the social norm where people feel they should respond to one person's action with an equivalent or greater action. This norm often means that the act of receiving a gift or having a favor done triggers the areas of the brain that control emotion and decision-making, resulting in a cognitive dissonance that must be resolved. In practice, this dynamic has been seen in studies that showed that when organizations included a small gift such as address labels or stickers in their outreach for donations or purchases, donations or sales increased.



Behavioral Science in Practice

Behavioral science has been used to solve complicated problems and help encourage large numbers of people to make positive changes in their behaviors and decision-making across many sectors including education, healthcare, civic engagement, financial planning, public safety, and sustainability.

Increasing Voter Turnout with Social Norms and Choice Architecture

Some states, political organizations, and nonpartisan groups have used behavioral science strategies to increase voter turnout. During the 2016 presidential election, registered voters across the nation who had not yet voted received fliers or text messages informing them of their neighbors, by name, who had already voted. This approach put pressure on the recipients to match their behavior with those around them. In 2016, the state of Oregon changed their approach to voter registration in order to increase voting rates. They automatically registered their residents and allowed them to opt out, rather than requiring them to initiate and opt in to the voting registration system. By removing the barrier of registering to vote, 272,000 people were added to the voter registration rolls, and 44% of them voted in the 2016 election.

Promoting Healthier Choices with Choice Architecture

Researchers have found that using the behavioral science tenet of choice architecture, where decisions are influenced by how choices are presented, can encourage people to make healthier decisions about eating and drinking. In a Massachusetts study, scientists color-coded items in a hospital cafeteria based on their nutritional value. They marked healthy items green, less healthy items yellow, and unhealthy items red. They also placed healthier food and drink options in more central and accessible locations. Purchases of healthy items increased from 41% to 46% and unhealthy items decreased from 24% to 21%. The impact was especially noteworthy on drink purchases. Healthy drink purchases increased from 52% to 60% and unhealthy drink purchases decreased from 27% to 18% over the course of the study.

¹[.org/10.1017/s000305540808009x](https://doi.org/10.1017/s000305540808009x). ²Ted Robertson and Dan Connolly, "Building a Culture of Voting through Choice Architecture," *Behavioral Scientist*, October 29, 2018, <https://behavioralscientist.org/building-a-culture-of-voting-through-choice-arch> Alan S. Gerber, Donald P. Green, and Christopher W. Larimer, "Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment," *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1 (2008): pp. 33-48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s000305540808009x>.

Reducing Energy Consumption with Nudges and Social Norms¹

Reducing energy consumption is a collective environmental priority and results in individual household financial benefits. A recent project by a utilities company sought to use social comparisons, coupled with tangible information, to reduce energy consumption across a wide swath of states. As part of the study, energy reports were sent to electricity and natural gas customers that included comparisons of their energy consumption to similar households over time and tips to reduce consumption going forward. Results showed substantial reductions in energy consumption by customers, especially those who had consumed high levels prior to the messaging. Projections based on the effectiveness of this program show that, if scaled nationally, this simple and low-cost intervention would significantly reduce carbon dioxide emissions from electric power.

The Power of Behavioral Science

Understanding behavioral science provides great potential for organizational leaders. By recognizing the ways that people are influenced when making decisions, organizational leaders can help guide stakeholders toward healthier and more productive decisions, behaviors, and outcomes.



PART 2 Best Practices from Behavioral Science

Behavioral science techniques can be a powerful tool to effect change within schools and districts. By using best practices and insights into how people act and make decisions, districts and schools can structure their communications, processes, and overall organizations to encourage stakeholders to plan and take steps to support positive outcomes.

With some small, nuanced shifts, communications and outreach can promote a more forward-thinking approach for families and students. Letters and emails can include language that encourages the setting of goals and the creation of a tangible plan to reach those goals. Districts can increase participation in programs by carefully considering whether programs should be opt-in or opt-out, and when to communicate messages and reminders to maximize impact. Schools and districts can time the sharing of information with families and students to ensure that the content is relevant and that action can still be taken to head off issues rather than address them after the fact. And schools and districts can establish social norms with families by communicating metrics from the community in addition to sharing feedback about an individual student to prompt shifts in understanding and behaviors.

All of these seemingly small but significant shifts can help districts and schools promote positive change. In order to put these insights from behavioral science into everyday practices when communicating with families, consider using the following strategies and tips.

Keep the message simple.

When communicating with students and families, it is vital that the content is easy to read and understand. When communication is readable, families are more likely to engage with the information and take action to achieve the intended outcomes.

Format: Ensure that content is delivered in a simple, easy-to-understand format with a basic typeface (in size 14 or larger for printed copy). Consider using bullets to break apart large sections of text. Reduce the number of words whenever possible, and make any action items clear with bold or underlined words. The top-left corner of documents is read first, so place the most important information there.

Word Choice and Tone: When communicating with families and students, it is important to consider how different words and phrases might be understood. Use simple, basic phrases and avoid acronyms or technical terms. It is important to maintain a professional voice and to convey a spirit of family partnership to work toward a common goal.

Reading Level: Make messaging accessible for all families by targeting the writing at a fourth-grade reading level. Consider using a Flesch-Kincaid readability test to ensure that the content is easily understood.

Pre-Populate Information: When asking families to complete a form or return information in any way, think about how to make the action easier to complete. If forms can be completed digitally or pre-filled with particular information from the school's student information system, filling out the paperwork will require less time. This technique of reducing the work (referred to as "friction" in behavioral science) can significantly increase participation and responses.

Make sure communication is purposeful.

Families and students are incredibly busy and often feel inundated with messages and communications from a wide variety of sources. In order to get the most impact out of your communications, it is important to be thoughtful about the timing and mode of communication and the guidance you include. Consider who the message should come from in order to convey the right meaning and level of urgency and carefully choose your words to motivate action and encourage follow-through from families.

Consider the Sender: Families and students pay attention to and respond differently to messages depending upon the sender. It is important to have the sender's name be someone meaningful to the family or student—someone they can identify and whose role they are familiar with. Having a message come from a school leader or the child's personal teacher often carries weight with families.

Match the Mode of Communication to the Purpose: Consider the purpose and intended outcome of the outreach when deciding how to share information. Text messages and emails are most productive for communication that requires an immediate action or short-term response. Printed copies either sent home or mailed to families are more likely to be kept as social artifacts in a home and facilitate thoughtful review and reflection, which can lead to longer-term behavioral changes. Phone calls are beneficial when a two-way conversation is needed or an issue is particularly urgent.

Establish Social Norms: Behavioral science has shown that people tend to conform to the standard behavior of others. Therefore, including information about how others in a school community act or behave (e.g., rates for participation in parent-teacher conferences or the completion of forms) can be a powerful tool to positively encourage an individual family or student's behavior.

Prompt to Make a Plan: In interactions with families, especially when addressing an emerging concern, consider ways to prompt families or students to make a concrete plan. For instance, if a child is behind on required vaccines, help the family identify a community resource to get the vaccine, make the appointment, and set a date to bring the paperwork to the school. By targeting steps to take, students and families can walk away with an actionable plan.

Share the Expectations for Follow-Up: When awaiting a response or action from a family, it can be helpful to let them know when and how you will follow up with them. This anticipated accountability makes people more likely to follow through on their plans.

Ensure that communication is programmatic.

Family and student communication should be part of a cohesive communications plan. This plan should align closely with broader district and school goals and calendars and should include proactive messaging as well as a framework for how educators will communicate with families and districts when an issue arises. Families and students should know when to expect communications and how they will receive them. This ensures that communications are strategically timed, build upon one another, and are more likely to be read and acted upon by families and students.

Planned: It is critical that districts and schools have a comprehensive communications plan from the start of the school year. This should include a multimodal approach to communications with a framework for when different communication modes will be used and a calendar to organize information sharing. This plan should also include guidance for how to handle contingencies when issues arise at the district, school, or individual student level. This ensures that communications are part of the routine operations of a district and that messaging does not get lost by the recipients.

Timely: The strategic timing of communications makes a big difference in their reach and utility. Some events require advance notice so families can prepare and register if necessary. This type of communication might be sent via email, printed mail, or as part of a calendar that provides an overview of the month ahead. Other types of events or information are best shared just beforehand via text or the classroom or school

communication system. These just-in-time reminders help busy families stay engaged with district and school events and needs. Oftentimes, using multiple modes of communication at the right times increases participation and impact.

Be Thorough: When putting together messaging, it is vital to ensure that all details are included. Sharing fragments of information can lead to frustration and confusion, which often stalls potential action from families.

Part of a Routine: Communications should be sent on a regular cadence as part of a predictable and expected schedule. Early in the year, districts, schools, and teachers should share with families and students how information will be communicated and their preferred mechanisms for feedback or questions. Well-established channels of communication are the foundation for meaningful family and student engagement.

PART 3 Using Behavioral Science to Improve Family Communication and Student Outcomes, Well-Being, and Success

Through subtle shifts in family and student outreach and engagement, behavioral science can help educators and district leaders innovate, increase the impact of their communications, and drive change within their school communities.

Use the checklist on the following pages to explore some tangible ways to put behavioral science principles and insights into practice and maximize the impact of your messaging, outreach, and programs across the domains of student attendance and engagement; family engagement; health, wellness, and student support; and college and career readiness.

These tips will help connect students and families with key information at the right time to take action, support educators in maintaining consistent contact with families, and increase meaningful engagement within a school or district community.

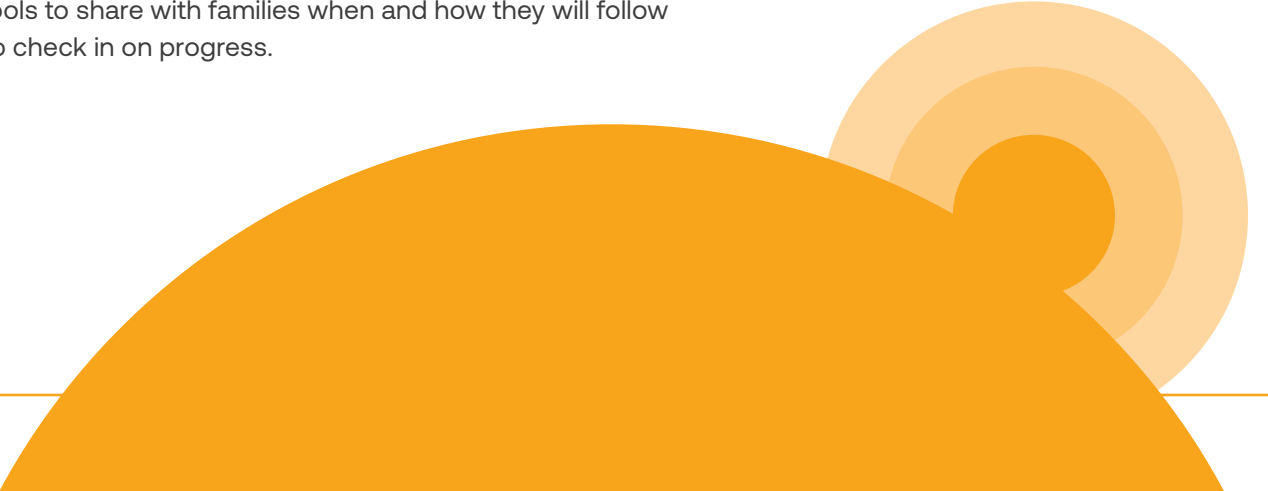




Student Attendance and Engagement

- ✓ **Registration:** Offer digital forms that include pre-populated information when possible for easy completion. Disseminate links via email in the weeks leading up to school.
- ✓ **First-Day Details:** A few weeks before the start of school, send a bulleted list of key information including start and dismissal times as well as directions for how to navigate the school campus. Then send a short follow-up text the night before school starts with a similar but abbreviated message.
- ✓ **Bus and Transportation Information:** When sending out bus or transportation information, prompt families to make a plan to note the times, bus number, and the pick-up and drop-off locations.
- ✓ **Extracurricular Sports, Arts, and Clubs:** Encourage schools and district departments to send out weekly texts and emails about upcoming extracurricular and enrichment opportunities for students. Include a short link when registration is required.
- ✓ **Attendance Notifications:** Create a system for schools to contact the families of students who have missed a set number of days. As part of the conversation, encourage schools to share with families when and how they will follow up to check in on progress.

Family Engagement

- ✓ **Learning Management System Login and Information:** Regularly send out login information and directions prompting families to check on their students' attendance, assignment completion, and grades. Share the contact information for school counselors so families know who to contact with any concerns.
 - ✓ **Parent-Teacher Conferences:** To increase participation at parent-teacher conferences or meetings, send information ahead of time along with reminders immediately before the event. Consider what participation options can be provided such as in-person meetings, videoconferences, or phone calls, and offer a digital sign-up.
 - ✓ **Volunteer Forms:** If a background check or other paperwork is required to volunteer in your school or district, include a link to the requisite form(s) as part of back-to-school registration.
 - ✓ **Library Cards:** Partner with the local library system to register students and families. Structure the process so that all families are automatically given an option to opt out (rather than requiring families to opt in).
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- ✓ **Reading at Home:** To make reading at home a priority, send families regular reminders that reading is important. Establish the norm that families can and should read with their children and that it makes a big difference in their learning.

Health, Wellness, and Student Support

- ✓ **Vaccines and Health Information:** Send information about vaccine requirements for students and ways to access vaccines and other health services for free. Use formatting and language that clearly states deadlines for health forms to be turned into schools, and encourage families to make a plan to follow through.
- ✓ **Meal Information and Distribution:** Share links or apps with students and families so they can easily view breakfast and lunch menus and prices. Include information about when students can access breakfast. Early in the year, share a link to fill out requisite paperwork for free and reduced-priced meals. And throughout the year, if schools are offering any type of meal distribution outside of school hours, send just-in-time reminders to prompt families to pick up the food.
- ✓ **Mental Health Support and Resources:** Use language to normalize that mental and emotional health are vitally important and that seeking help is a common and positive practice. Regularly provide families and students with a list of relevant resources to promote emotional health and well-being and contact information for people within a school or district who can offer help.
- ✓ **Academic Support:** Regularly provide information about school or district resources for academic support or tutoring. Align these messages with the distribution


of interim reports and report cards. Consider having the messages come from a student's direct teacher or counselor to increase the likelihood that the message will be read and acted upon.

- ✓ **Information Sharing:** To increase your reach and ensure that families can access information, post relevant support links, calendars, and contact information on various social media platforms and community bulletin boards in addition to direct outreach to families.

College and Career Readiness

- ✓ **Internships and Industry Certifications:** Share opportunities for skill development and job training with both students and families, including students as young as middle school. Use simple language to help encourage students to connect their interests with potential career pathways.
- ✓ **Testing Date Reminders:** Send an email at the beginning of junior and senior year with dates and registration deadlines for the school year. Send text message reminders with a link just before the registration window closes for each testing date.
- ✓ **FAFSA, College Applications, and Scholarships:** Share information with students and families about these college planning steps. Use simple, plain language that does not assume previous knowledge or an understanding of the process. Send email and text reminders throughout the year as registration or due dates near, and include easy-to-access resources and ways for students to seek additional help or guidance as needed.

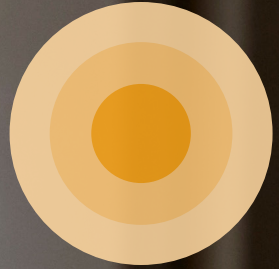
PART 4 EveryDay Labs: Harnessing the Power of Behavioral Science



At EveryDay Labs, we apply the power of behavioral science to family communications to improve attendance, increase enrollment, and strengthen student outcomes. We know that the impact of any school or district initiative—whether it be curriculum enhancements, supplemental materials, academic interventions, comprehensive wellness, or teacher professional development—hinges on students being in attendance and engaged in learning.

Our approach is built on years of research into how people make decisions, best practices for how to encourage positive behavioral change, and proven implementation with families, students, and school districts. We systematically connect families to information so they understand the critical importance of attendance. We also offer meaningful supports so families can take steps to ensure that their children are regularly engaged in learning. And we provide access to resources that help families overcome underlying barriers to attendance.

By bringing our rich understanding of how students and families make decisions, we can help districts maximize the effectiveness of their work, catalyze the recovery of students, strengthen school-family connections, and ultimately develop the long-term resiliency of student enrollment, engagement, and attendance.



To learn more about how EveryDay Labs can help you effectively partner with families to increase K-12 attendance, visit everydaylabs.com or email us at info@everydaylabs.com.

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Handwriting practice lines consisting of 20 horizontal blue lines.





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