BEYOND
BOOKSMART

4 Steps to Effective Coaching

How students can learn better work and study habits

A guide for parents

Introduction

"Why is my smart child struggling in school?"

Your child is smart. You see a world of possibilities awaiting your child.

If only…

If only they could be more organized or stop getting distracted by their phones or be more disciplined about how they work or remember to hand in their homework. You've tried giving them advice but frankly, they aren't interested.

How can you help your bright child shine when they don't have the critical skills for managing their demands at school? The answer lies in understanding how people change their behavior and cultivate new habits.

In this guide, we will describe four critical requirements for effective behavior change in students:

1 Reaching a student by meeting them where they're at

2 Teaching students with tailored tools and strategies

3 Reflecting on what works and what doesn't work

4 Releasing the student to independently apply their new skills

We will explain why each component is critical and how Beyond BookSmart coaching incorporates these principles to help students effectively develop their skills, achieve their goals, and ultimately transform their habits to meet the needs of complex and changing academic and life demands.

1 Reaching a student by meeting them where they're at

Learning new habits is uncomfortable

Building good habits involves repetition. Lots of it. There's no easy shortcut, much as we may want a quick fix to anything we are trying to improve: healthful eating, fewer Netflix binges, clutter-free countertops. The same applies to students. They may want to procrastinate less, get to class on time, or keep their desks organized, but the uncomfortable truth is that making those changes is, well, uncomfortable at first.

After all, when you or your child is building a brand new habit, there's a great deal of behind-the-scenes action happening. First, you have to have the insight that your current habit is not leading to your desired outcome: stress-free evenings, easily locating house keys or class handouts, reduced homework battles, and so on. Second, you need to identify exactly what needs to be done differently in order to achieve a better result. Third, and most important, you need to simultaneously stop an ingrained pattern of behavior and start a brand new pattern, and stick with that new behavior for a while.

In other words, you need to stop doing what has become easy and purposely do something difficult. Is it any wonder that it's so tough to follow through on that intention to build a better habit?

Desire for change varies

Research tells us that behavior change is a process that has several predictable stages. It's not as simple as black or white; do it or don't do it; human beings are complex creatures and these stages reflect those shades of gray that are involved in changing any habit.

1 Reaching a student by meeting them where they're at

Consider your own experience with change. For instance, on your way to deciding to strap on that Fitbit and get your 10,000 steps a day, it's likely that you went through a series of changes in your mindset that made it possible.

See if you can recognize your own path to change in the stages and examples below:

Stage One: "No, I am not interested in discussing this. It's not a problem and I don't need to do anything about it."

Stage Two: "I am thinking about changing my behavior, but I'm not committing to doing anything. I may decide not to change after all."

Stage Three: "I've decided that it's a good idea to change my behavior and I'm making a plan for how and when I'll do it."

Stage Four: "I'm working on my new behavior and trying to keep consistent. I slip up sometimes but try to get right back to my new way of doing things."

Stage Five: "I have a solid new habit that takes the place of the old behavior. It doesn't feel difficult to do anymore."

These five stages of change are based in research that has decades of proven efficacy in helping people to change their habits.

1 Reaching a student by meeting them where they're at

How we reach students in different stages

"When you clench your fist, no one can put anything in your hand." Alex Haley

We often hear parents say to us that they've tried giving their child tips and direction for how to study better or keep their room clean or talk with teachers. These helpful suggestions are often dismissed or ignored because the student is in the first stage of behavior change, where they don't see a reason to do anything different. In other words, their mind is closed to the idea and there's no way to force it open. How do we get students to "unclench their fists" and open their minds to the possibility of changing their work and study habits? The answer is by starting with making an authentic connection with the student.

For students in Stage One, we focus on building the relationship so that the student begins to see the coach as an ally and mentor. We assure the student that we will never force them to do anything and that they will always have choices in their work with the coach.

Listening carefully to the student and empathizing with their feelings is a critical component at this stage - it forms a foundation of trust upon which the coaching relationship is built. Once a trusting relationship is established, coaches often invite students to consider imagining how their lives might improve with new habits in place. They may guide students through a careful consideration of the pros and cons of changing their habits as a way to segue the student to Stage Two in their journey of change.

Students who are in Stage Two are typically ambivalent about changing their habits. Coaches help students explore their attitudes at this point in the coaching process, as a way to help them gain a deeper understanding of their behavior and beliefs about their ability to make positive changes in their lives. They also explore the costs to not making changes and examine the downside of maintaining the status quo, to highlight the problems they're

1 Reaching a student by meeting them where they're at

How we reach students in different stages

experiencing and inspire just enough discomfort to move toward actually wanting to make change. In Stage Two, coaches often share examples of tools or strategies students could use and discuss how these can simplify a student's life, if they decide to try them. Students learn that change is a process and not a single event, which can help them see that any goal they set can be achieved with the right plan in place.

Stage Three marks a turning point in the coaching process. At this time, the student has decided to change a habit because they've discovered their own reasons and understand how they will benefit from that change. Maybe it's the way they handle their homework, or organize their materials, or interact with teachers - regardless of the desired outcome, success begins with a specific plan the student can follow. Coaches work with students in Stage Three to determine the *when* and the *how* of enacting their plan. Students are encouraged to be as specific as possible and to anticipate roadblocks so

they can be prepared to follow through on their plan.

For instance, if a student decides that they are going to start building a habit of starting homework by no later than 5:00 every weekday afternoon, a coach may prompt the student to consider how their best intentions may be foiled. The student may think for a moment and mention that it's hard to hit the stop button once they start watching some YouTube videos after school - before they know it, it's 9:00pm and they haven't even started their homework.

With this roadblock uncovered, the coach and student can collaboratively

1 Reaching a student by meeting them where they're at

How we reach students in different stages

devise a plan to counter that time-draining activity. Perhaps the student agrees to block that website with an app like Self Control until later in the evening, when their homework is completed. This process of anticipating problems in following through with a plan improves the student's chances of success. When students get a quick win early on by sticking with their plan, they begin to build confidence that they can make changes successfully, despite any roadblocks that occur.

Of course, after making a detailed plan comes Stage Four, where a student is actively doing something different. It could be, for example, filing their papers daily, or staying after school for extra help, or digging into homework before dinnertime. **Coaching in Stage Four is focused on helping the student be accountable for sticking with their plan, even when it's difficult.** Coaches check in with students between sessions, typically via text messages, to encourage and provide reinforcement for following through with their plans.

Perfection is not the goal - the student's ownership of new behavior is the aim in Stage Four. Through frequent reflection, coaches help students identify and celebrate successes and bounce back from failures. Students learn that changing an old habit and replacing it with a new one takes time, patience, and persistence. As they gain insight about how they motivate themselves and what strategies work best for them, students become equipped to expand their skills beyond the academic world.

At Stage Five, a student has a solidly established habit that feels less effortful than in Stage Four. The student has moved toward actually *being* that person who keeps organized or finishes their homework well before bedtime, instead of *trying to be* someone who does those behaviors. As with any habit, backsliding to old habits can and does occur from time to time. Coaches help students identify the cause of any backslides and frame those moments as normal - the key is to return to the new habit without an "all or nothing" mindset that could allow a reversal to old habits.

1 Reaching a student by meeting them where they're at

Why the connection with the coach is so important

In this stage, coaches often reflect on how far a student has progressed as one way to reinforce new behaviors and build confidence. Sessions may start to include explorations of how to apply their new habit to other contexts. If a student has become very organized with their school materials, for instance, a coach may ask how they may use similar strategies to organize the student's personal space at home.

With many resistant students who deny that they could benefit from support or changing their habits, what we see underlying that resistance is a powerful emotion: shame. **Students are often ashamed or embarrassed at their shortcomings or the holes they've dug for themselves and it can feel more comfortable for them to shut themselves off to intervention.** In a way, it's understandable for a struggling student to dig in their heels. When students resist support, they can avoid confronting their challenges.

That's why it is critical to allow time for a coach and student to develop a trusting relationship. When a student sees their coach as a true ally, that student becomes more willing to take risks in trying new ways of approaching their demands.

Making change meaningful

Here's a good moment to address the issue of motivation. Typically, parents try to motivate their children in a number of ways: by giving advice, issuing warnings, doling out punishments, or leaning on reward systems. While this can work in the short-term, this approach has two big problems: first, it keeps children dependent on parents as the backbone to those tactics. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, it misses the fact that students are driven by their own motives, not their parents' motives. In the long run, students need to gain insight that helps them self-motivate. That's why coaches emphasize what's in it for the student when it comes to making changes. **Using goals that matter personally to the student help them to buy-in to the process and be active participants in coaching.**

2 Teaching Students with Tailored Tools and Strategies

Context Matters

Have you ever noticed that when someone offers advice on an issue that's not currently a problem for you, that you tend to tune it out? That's because the context or personal relevance is missing. The same can be said for effective coaching of students: it's not as simple as offering a cookie-cutter curriculum and hoping students will recognize when and where to apply strategies in their daily work. Instead, students need to feel value from the time they spend with a coach - and that value is in the form of relevant tools and strategies that meet their needs in the moment - *today*.

Choice Matters

So much of a student's day is non-negotiable. They cannot decide when classes start, where they occur during the day, the subject matter covered, who the teacher is, or whether they have homework that night. **Yet research shows that choice is a key factor in keeping students engaged with their learning.**

That's why coaches build choice into the coaching process. They may present a student a couple of options for planning a project, for instance, and help the student evaluate them according to the student's needs and preferences in combination with the demands of the assignment. Students feel empowered and invested when they have a say in the strategies they use to overcome their challenges. Another important aspect of choice is that the process prompts reflection and introspection. A coach may ask, "I notice that you've selected the same tool for both preparing for a French test and planning your biology lab. Why do you think it will work well for both? What do you like about this strategy?"

2 Teaching Students with Tailored Tools and Strategies

Explorations behind the reason for students' choices help them learn more about themselves and serve as a guide for future choices.

Customization matters

At first, when a student is introduced to a new tool or strategy, it is common for them to not see how it may apply to their specific instance. A template for helping to plan out any long-term assignment may may not seem useful to a student working on a month-long social studies poster project, for example. This is where the coach shows, in concrete terms, how a tool can be customized for a particular need. In the previous example, a coach may show how to add a column to the template to add in teacher comments on a rough draft, or to change column headings to more accurately reflect what needs to be done and when. While adults can typically be expected to think abstractly and figure out how to modify a tool for their purposes, students often need support to imagine how to use a generic tool for their own needs.

This is one reason why some students run into difficulties successfully using all-purpose graphic organizers - a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't feel relevant or useful to them. Coaches help students determine the answer to the question, "How can this work for me?"

Follow-up matters

Can you recall a time when you intended to do something but never followed through? We've all had those moments (sometimes more often than we'd like to admit). That's why coaches ask students to make specific commitments during sessions. A student may say, "I will stay after school with my math teacher next Tuesday to get ready for the test Friday." The coach then follows up to see if the student met their commitment. This check-in can take any form, though typically students prefer text messages to communicate with their coaches between sessions. These brief check-ins (typically 1-2 minutes) serve two important roles in the coaching process.

2 Teaching Students with Tailored Tools and Strategies

First, check-ins help to remind students and keep them accountable for their commitments. **When students know a coach will be following up with them, they are much more likely to go through with their intended plan, which helps students make steady progress toward their goals.** Second, checking in helps to build the connection between the client and coach, so that a student comes to understand that their coach is an ally and is invested in their wellbeing.

Consistency matters

A student's goals in coaching, like fitness goals, can only be achieved through consistent work. **Just as you couldn't expect to run a marathon by only training once a month, the process of developing Executive Function skills relies upon ongoing, regular coaching sessions.** Even though life can get hectic and families can feel torn between the different activities and demands of daily life, the parents' commitment to consistent coaching sessions for their child will help to reinforce the importance of the work that is being done. We've found that when coaching is infrequent, progress can suffer. Students can lose momentum when they have a pattern of starting and stopping regular coaching sessions, as the coach often needs to go back and review strategies that the student may have forgotten. Even when a student has fewer work demands due to holidays or school vacations, coaches can make headway toward a student's goal areas in a number of ways, such as through reflective exercises and meaningful personal projects.

3 Reflecting on what works and what doesn't work

The philosopher and educator John Dewey said, "We do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience."

Without taking the time to reflect on progress and roadblocks, a student can't be expected to gain true insight into themselves and their needs and capacities. How often have you seen your child make the same mistakes over and over, while wondering why they can't seem to correct those errors? It's possible that the missing ingredient was reflection.

Through the process of careful reflection, students start to understand who they are as learners and make decisions that take into account their strengths and challenges.

Take, for example, a student who repeatedly gets tripped up by a poor study strategy - perhaps it's just passively skimming through class notes to prepare for a rigorous essay test. That student may feel upset that they are not getting the results they want but lack the insight and expertise to troubleshoot the situation. They may blame the teacher, the time of day the test was given, or an argument they had with a friend at lunch that day as the cause of their poor outcome on the test. Now it seems a little easier to imagine why the student keeps repeating the same mistake.

A coach would prompt the student to reflect on their behaviors in order to help the student gain insight - their own "aha" moment - that helps them abandon old habits and adopt new, more effective methods.

3 Reflecting on what works and what doesn't work

What the reflection practice brings to the student

Reflecting helps students make connections between one experience and the next. They begin to see that, instead of a random series of events, their experiences influence their choices. **Through reflection, students can also gain a deeper meaning from the schoolwork they do.** Rather than complaining about all those "useless" assignments, a student can begin to understand how the knowledge or skills they are acquiring in a given class allow them to prepare for more advanced topics in the future, for instance, or help them maintain a good relationship with a teacher from whom they may ask for a recommendation the following year.

Insightful students can set and recalibrate goals more realistically. While goals should be challenging, they should also be achievable. Consider, for example, a student who wants to get an A on every quiz and test in the coming semester.

It's an admirable goal, but it may be an unrealistic jump to expect for a student who had been struggling to get Cs the prior semester. Upon reflection and the coach's guidance, the student may come to understand that setting a goal relating to their process for studying may be the more useful way to attain their objective of earning better test scores. The revised goal may be to start active study strategies 3 days before a test and to make sure they attend an after school review session.

3 Reflecting on what works and what doesn't work

Ongoing reflection with the coach would likely result in some adjustments to this process-oriented goal over the coming weeks. Ultimately, the student finishes the semester with an improvement to their test scores, a solid set of test preparation strategies, and a deeper self-knowledge that helps them be a more effective learner.

Framing setbacks and emphasizing successes

Finally, the process of reflection gives equal time to the wins and not just the struggles. **Too often, students who are accustomed to failure see only the problems they've encountered.** When students are prompted to consider what went well and why, the positive emphasis helps build back their self-esteem and gain resilience when they struggle.

4 Releasing the Student to Independently Apply New Skills

The ultimate goal in coaching is for the student to be independent and graduate from a coach's support. As with any journey of self-improvement and personal discovery, the timeline toward independence can vary. Some students who enter the process prepared to make immediate changes in a couple areas (Stage Four, described earlier), such as managing their screen time, can be independent with their new skill set in a relatively short time. Conversely, students who begin coaching at Stage One - or for whom a wide range of self-management skills need development - can expect a longer path toward independence.

"Beyond BookSmart's approach to learning truly paved the way for my success in high school and beyond. To this day, I continue to use a number of the skills that I've learned which have helped me form connections with my professors and excel in my classes. These abilities will undoubtedly continue to lead me on the path to success beyond college and into my daily life and career pursuits."

Sean, college student in New York

How do coaches know a student is ready to graduate?

Coaches look for a student who has transformed their habits and can apply their strategies without prompting or assistance from the coach. Students are typically ready to move on from coaching when students feel confident in their ability to handle whatever comes their way in school. **A new self-image emerges as students see themselves as capable, resilient, and equipped with the tools they need to be successful learners.** When the time is best for the student, it's important to show that we have confidence in their abilities to manage their demands without coaching support. Be assured that returning to coaching is always an option, should the need arise. In fact, many of our students come back to coaching at times of transition, such as high school, college, or a first job in order to update and refine their tools and strategies for an environment with increased demands.

Conclusion

Beyond BookSmart coaches promote lasting behavior change by using the four steps to effective coaching: **Reach, Teach, Reflect, and Release.**

Our process of coaching has 4 elements:

1) Reach: Connecting with the student and meeting them where they're at

2) Teach: Using tailored tools and strategies to learn new work habits

3) Reflect: Pausing and reflecting on results in order to solidify learning

4) Release: Encouraging the student to independently apply their personal toolkit of strategies

No shortcuts to meaningful change

There are no shortcuts toward lasting and meaningful change. The brain is an adaptive organ that helps us learn new skills by actually doing them - but those neural connections take time to establish (and time, as well, to undo ineffective habits). Just as you wouldn't expect to become healthy and fit by training infrequently, the goal of behavior and attitude change takes consistent work. It also takes a belief that the student will achieve their goals, given the optimal circumstances: a caring, dedicated coach who is invested in their client's success, a consistent schedule of meetings, and a process that helps a student gain insight along with the personalized tools that will transform the way they see themselves and their possibilities in the greater world.

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