

ALL IT TAKES®

# A TRUSTED SPACE®

*Decoding Behavior*

## THE INTERSECTION OF NEUROSCIENCE AND BEHAVIOR

**Discussion & Activities**



## Film Overview

Get ready for "Decoding Behavior," the latest installment in the Trusted Space series. This urgent and impactful docu-training film for educators explores the intricate connection behavior has to developmental science, offering an important lens through which educators can decode escalating behaviors and declining academic focus.

The educational and inspirational film confronts the escalating indicators of the mental health crisis among students—soaring rates of suicidal ideation, disruptive behavior, and emotional distress. But it doesn't stop at just laying bare the grim statistics; it delves into the science behind them. Gain insights from leading experts who unravel the neurobiological mechanisms influencing behavior, demystifying the often misinterpreted actions of students.

Within the education ecosystem, where cognitive skills often overshadow emotional literacy, this film champions the imperative of a balanced education. It illuminates the vital role educators can play in creating trusted spaces—sanctuaries where students are empowered to explore, express, connect, and evolve. By recognizing and addressing the neurobiological underpinnings of behavior, educators can cultivate environments that not only foster academic excellence but also promote mental well-being.

This is a must-watch for any educator invested in creating a more empathetic and nuanced approach to student behavior and mental health. Share this film within your educational community to ignite impactful conversations and pave the way for systemic change.

This episode, like its predecessors, stands as a testament to the education ecosystem's enduring commitment to fostering dialogues that can catalyze positive transformations. Brought to you by All It Takes in Partnership with CalHOPE and the California Department of Health Care Services.

## Maximize This Film With Your Team

This film is a great way to begin a conversation and find solutions within your own community of educators or parents. Filled with science and research, the film focuses a formal yet relatable lens on neuroscience while offering practical and powerful tools to address the challenges head on with compassion and conviction. The film does not ask educators to 'simply take it' from students. Instead, it offers insights into what is happening to young brain development and ways to circumvent much of the behavior we are experiencing on campuses today.

**A TRUSTED SPACE**

*Decoding Behavior*

**THE INTERSECTION  
OF NEUROSCIENCE  
& BEHAVIOR**

# Staff Meeting or Short PD Gathering

**PD Time:** 45 Minutes

**Prep Time:** 20-25 minute prep for facilitator to pre-screen the film and set up the session.

Carve out 45 minutes of staff time to watch the film together, followed by a deep dive conversation into the content and how it is, or is not, relevant to the realities happening at your school.

**3 Minutes:** Introduction

- Introduction to the film, *A Trusted Space: Decoding Behavior: The Intersection of Neuroscience and Behavior*
- Read or paraphrase the film's description and relate it to the needs/issues facing your school - why are you choosing to take the time to play this film and facilitate a discussion?

**20 Minutes:** Show the film

**15 Minutes:** Facilitate Mirror-Neuron Discussion and/or Storytelling Activity

## **Mirror-Neuron Discussion**

Ask the audience to find a partner who is not in their department or a colleague they spend a lot of time with. Once partnerships are established with fidelity (make sure they are meeting the request to partner outside their comfort zone with integrity), give a couple minutes for each of the following prompts:

### **Prompts:**

Marcy speaks in the film about Mirror-Neurons, the brain's auto-reaction to stimulus. For instance, an upset of one starts to influence an upset of others, or the calm of one influences the calm of another. Think of yawns and how they seem to be contagious - Mirror-Neurons are, in a way, a contagion, and the more we recognize this, the better we can interrupt it when influence is going in a direction that will not be healthy or productive.

How do you see Mirror-Neuron reactions/influences showing up in everyday interactions between:

1. Teachers and Teachers?
2. Students and Teachers?
3. Students and Students?
4. Parents and Students/Teachers?

What ways can educators 'interrupt' the Mirror-Neuron experience when it is headed down a challenging path? What is the first thing that needs to happen to begin an interruption? (*hint: awareness and acceptance that it is happening*).

## **Storytelling Activity**

In the film, the act of storytelling is mentioned numerous times. Lori speaks to the need for storytelling to come from an intention to 'relate' rather than 'teach' or 'make a point.' The difference can be subtle, and the impact significant.

An example of storytelling to relate comes from a direct experience Lori had with a 6th-grade teacher during a training she was delivering.

*During the training, a teacher was expressing frustration with a particular student who was very resistant to any type of writing activity. In his resistance to writing, the teacher was experiencing defiance and a disregard for her efforts to reach this student. In this, her reaction back to the student was impatience, annoyance, and growing intolerance for him. This was all creating a space where the student didn't feel accepted, and he continued to push against her every request. This was a daily 'no win' situation between the student and teacher, which also affected all the other students in the class. It had gone far beyond a 'writing issue.'*

*Hearing this teacher's frustration, Lori spoke about storytelling as a way to help this student respond differently to the teacher and to writing in general. She prompted the teacher to consider her childhood education and to find something about school that felt hard, felt unachievable, and made her feel inadequate. The teacher said, "Math made me feel that way. It was always hard for me, and I always felt stupid and frustrated." She continued, "I remember times when I cried during my homework because I just couldn't get it."*

*From this place, Lori invited the teacher to consider telling her story about how she felt when she was a student and had to overcome hurdles and upset in math work. She asked her to share her story from a place of relating to the feelings she experienced rather than the space of 'Teaching.'*

**Teaching:** *'I did it, so can you!' Or, 'School isn't easy, just try harder.' 'I don't like everything I have to do, but I do it anyway.'*

**Relating:** *'You know, I remember being in 6th grade and really struggling with math. I never felt like I could keep up and felt stupid and so different from everyone else. I even remember crying during homework and just wanting to give up. I felt miserable so much of the time. I wonder if you ever feel like this when I ask you to do a writing activity?'*

*The teacher really took this approach to heart. The morning training ended, and Lori had an afternoon session to teach. When packing up at the end of the day, this same teacher approached her with a new energy and a big smile. She shared that she took storytelling from a new lens and worked with the student, starting with her own story. Making relating to his feelings the priority rather than trying to convince him he 'needed to write!' She shared, with tears in her eyes, that this young boy wrote more that afternoon than he had all year. Both of them felt seen, heard, and successful with one another for the first time that year.*

After sharing this story, ask your staff to find a partner. Have them go through the following prompts, each sharing their experiences one at a time. Give each prompt 2-3 minutes with about 30 seconds to consider their answers.

1. Think of one or more students you struggle with. What are the triggers they push that evoke upset in you? What keeps you from finding empathy and patience with them?
2. Think back to your years as a student in school. Think of a time when you felt singled out, inadequate, unsuccessful, unseen, unintelligent, or not believed in.
  - A. What was the subject?
  - B. Who was the teacher?
  - C. How old were you?
  - D. How did you feel? Name 3-5 feelings that are associated with the story you are remembering.
  - E. What behaviors did you engage in because of these feelings?
3. Now, share with your partner a 'relating' story that would be appropriate for the student(s) who trigger you. Bridge your childhood experience and feelings to what you think your current student might be experiencing and feeling.
4. Make a commitment to start sharing 'relating' stories with your students and running them by trusted supporters as an opportunity to improve relationships with the students you serve.

## Key Points to Relatable Storytelling

1. Avoid trying to teach or make a point.
2. Make your stories about feelings rather than the event.
  - A. Students today can not relate to 'what happened' to you back then. They can relate to how you felt in a situation, even if the situation is unrelatable.
  - B. Ex: they can not relate to when we did not have social media, phones, etc. When we use this as a reason for them to appreciate what they have because we didn't have it, we become irrelevant and out of touch with their world. We lose credibility that we have any relevance in their life. They can not see us as on their side if we try to compare their current lived experience to our past lived experience.
3. Sharing stories does not mean giving up privacy. There is a balance between saying too much and too little. When we keep stories to an expression of feelings, we don't have to say much about the actual story to have someone feel connected to us.
  - A. Students do not have to hear about a fight we had with a partner. They can simply hear, 'This has been a rough morning following a rough night. Has anyone else ever had a rough morning after a rough night?' 'I feel exhausted and a bit more impatient than usual. How do you feel after a night and morning like this?'
  - B. Bringing conversations like this into classrooms, onto playgrounds, and into leadership groups, helps build trust, rapport, and connection. When we have these things, we have a space where learning can take place.



# Maximize This Film With Your Students

## **Mirror-Neuron Lesson for Students (Grades 4 - 12)**

**Prep Time:** 20-25 minute prep for facilitator to pre-screen the film and set up the session

**Lesson Time:** 45 Minutes

**3 Minutes:** Introduction

- Introduction to the film, *A Trusted Space: Decoding Behavior: The Intersection of Neuroscience and Behavior*
- Read or paraphrase the film's description and relate it to the needs/issues facing your school - why are you choosing to take the time to play this film and facilitate a discussion?

**20 Minutes:** Show the film

**15 Minutes:** Facilitate Mirror-Neuron Discussion

Using this clip to teach students about Mirror-Neurons gives students an understanding of what is actually taking place in their brain and how it influences their reactions. With understanding comes the ability to develop self-regulation skills and manage outcomes with confidence. This results in greater self-efficacy and reliance.

### **Lesson:**

1. Either play the film in its entirety to students or cue up the Mirror Neuron piece and play it as a stand-alone clip.
2. Invite student voices into the conversation by partnering students up in dyads. Using a random selection process is ideal. One way to do this is to ask students to line up in two rows facing each other. Have them calmly fist-bump the partner across from them. Then, ask the two students on the left end of one row to walk to the far right end, and all students in that row move down two spots. This separates friends and randomly selects which partner students will work with for this activity. Remind the moaners that this is simply one activity, and they can do it. No saving them by letting them choose their own partner or moan their way out of it. It will be worth it on the other side.

3. Have partnerships discuss the following prompts:

- A. Marcy speaks in the film about Mirror-Neurons, the brain's auto-reaction to stimulus. For instance, an upset of one starts to influence an upset of others, or the calm of one influences the calm of another. Think of yawns and how they seem to be contagious - Mirror-Neurons are, in a way, a contagion, and the more we recognize this the better we are able to interrupt it when influence is going in a direction that will not be healthy or productive.

How do you see Mirror-Neuron reactions/influences showing up in everyday interactions between:

1. Students and Teachers?
2. Students and Students?

B. Have students share a story of a time they can relate to Mirror-Neurons having influence over their own mood, behavior, words, attitudes.

C. Ask partnerships to form groups of four.

D. Give the groups poster paper and markers or other means of recording thoughts.

1. Ask them to write down ways they think they can manage Mirror-Neurons when they recognize them happening.
2. Ask them to write down ways they can support others in interrupting a Mirror-Neuron event proactively and positively.
3. Ask students to share their group thoughts with the larger group.



**Giving this a try? How did it go?  
What support could you use?  
We want to hear from you so we can  
create better versions of our work!**

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