



# THE DEAR REEL MODEL

## CLASSROOM STRATEGIES FOR TWICE-EXCEPTIONAL STUDENT SUCCESS

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## INTRODUCTION

**“Human beings not only have the potential to be great in their own unique way, but also need to be great in their own unique way. They need to be great and relevant in order to be happy, to be psychologically healthy, and to have a strong sense of self-worth.”**

- Dr. Yong Zhao (2018)

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Do you teach a bright child who struggles to show what they know? Know of a student who loves to think about numbers or discuss advanced math concepts but resists doing a simple math assignment? Or, do you have a student who has memorized elaborate sequences of historical events but can't remember to turn in their homework? What about a child who conducts deep, well-reasoned debates with you but struggles with reading or writing? Or a child who impresses adults with their wisdom and insights but doesn't navigate peer-to-peer relationships and frustration well? You may be working with twice-exceptional (2e) students, who experience learning differences (neurodivergence) such as dyslexia, ADHD, or autism AND significant academic, creative, and/or leadership strengths.

2e children's unique brain wiring often makes them appear wildly asynchronous—they're exceptional at some aspects of learning and living, and confounded by others. Their teachers, family, and friends are often confused by their performance, personal interactions, and behaviors.

This whitepaper helps educators discover new strategies and ideas for supporting twice-exceptional (2e) students at school. 2e is one learning profile among many, and can intersect with other aspects of a learner's profile, including socio-economic status (SES), ethnicity, culture, nationality, gender, and physical

### **About REEL2e**

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REEL2e is a 501(c)(3) non-profit that strives to ensure Silicon Valley twice-exceptional students thrive in school by raising parent and educator awareness and understanding of practical, research-based strategies to address their needs successfully. REEL supports 2e kids by building bridges between educators and parents.

**For educators**, REEL creates and curates resources, workshops, and programs to help them make school a place that 2e learners can be successful.

**For parents**, REEL organizes and disseminates events and tools to help parents learn to advocate for and support their 2e kids.

Learn more on our website:  
[www.reel2e.org](http://www.reel2e.org)

disabilities. We know from research<sup>1</sup> that 2e children are often unseen for their potential, misdiagnosed, late diagnosed, and misunderstood.

Looking at the implications, research shows that 2e children's mental health is at great risk as their lived experiences are often imbued with frustration, rejection, loneliness, anxiety, and depression. This then increases their risk of chronic absenteeism, school refusal, low concept, poor educational outcomes (including not attending college when they may be capable and interested), and long-term employment challenges. We know this is something that our Silicon Valley families of 2e learners experience, since only two out of five recently reported that their child is thriving in their current school environment. This situation is compounded if the child comes from a culturally, linguistically, and/or economically diverse background, as studies show that educators are more likely to notice these children's deficits rather than their strengths.

*Studies show that educators are more likely to focus on the deficits of culturally, linguistically, and/or economically diverse students rather than strengths.*

*Only two out of five parents of 2e learners in Silicon Valley report that their child is thriving in their current school environment*

It is important to note that while we at REEL focus on the 2e, we are not saying they are more important or higher priority than other students, but that *they, like all students, have the right to learn; to discover, explore, and develop their unique talents; and to feel a sense of belonging.* And, sadly, too often, this isn't their lived experience. It is with this lens that we welcome you to this whitepaper, as we all work together to support twice-exceptional learners and maximize their potential at school and in life!

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<sup>1</sup> Please see the "References" section at the end of this document.

## A REFRESHER - WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE TWICE-EXCEPTIONAL (2e)?

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This whitepaper delves into the details of supporting students who are twice-exceptional. You may be somewhat familiar with 2e, perhaps through our Neurodiversity Simulation or our Intro to 2e workshops. However, if you are unfamiliar with neurodiversity and 2e, that's ok! Please take a moment to learn more on our [website](#), browse our [offerings for educators](#), and reach out to us for more information.

For a quick refresher, let's recall that 2e students have distinguishing strengths. They have high ability or potential in one or more areas, including:

- One or more academic subject(s)
- Cognitive skills such as memory, attention to detail, or high verbal abilities
- Intense drive to learn in areas of interest
- Unexpectedly high creative ability

At the same time, a learner with a 2e profile has complex challenges, often including neurodevelopmental disabilities such as dyslexia, ADHD, or autism.

Baum et al (2017)<sup>2</sup> reminds us that it is helpful to think of twice exceptional students as being “green” - they have both “yellow” strengths and high abilities in one or more areas, while at the same time complex “blue” challenges, which combine and interact to produce a twice exceptional student (see image on the next page). While most students shift from the yellow to the blue at different times throughout their day, 2e kids are always in the green. They experience and display aspects of their strengths and challenges at the same time.<sup>3</sup>

**For more general information on twice-exceptionality, we recommend these resources:**

- [REEL Resources: Intro to 2e](#)
- [Video: Twice-Exceptional Students](#) (Aurora Public Schools - Colorado, 2018)
- [Video: What is twice exceptional?](#) (Seth Perler, 2018)
- [Bridges 2e Center for Research and Development](#)
- [Twice-Exceptional Learners 2e Handbook](#) (Fairfax County Public Schools - Virginia)

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<sup>2</sup> Baum, S. M., Schader, R. M., Steven, O. V. (2017). To be gifted and learning disabled: Strength-based strategies for helping twice-exceptional students with LD, ADHD, ASD, and more. Prufrock Press.

<sup>3</sup> Complex challenges include: Specific Learning Disability (SLD - includes dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, among others), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

### Distinguishing strengths

High abilities, or potential  
in one or more areas



### Complex challenges

SLD, ADHD, ODD, GAD,  
ASD, and others

2e individuals have distinguishing strengths and complex challenges **at the same time**. Their strengths and challenges combine and interact, requiring support which differs from those with only one of these exceptionalities.

While it's established that kids with complex challenges have the right to services through IDEA and our special education system, only some communities offer discrete services for kids who have distinguishing strengths to help nurture and grow their abilities. Services focused on strengths are not widespread in Silicon Valley, REEL's geographic area of focus. Often, a student's strengths may be masking their struggle or their struggle may be masking their strength. Thus, their need for support may be misunderstood or go completely unrecognized.

*Often, a student's strengths may be masking their struggles or their struggle may be masking their strength.*

Many bright students with learning differences may fly under the radar, because their high abilities allow them to compensate just enough that their learning challenges go unrecognized. They may appear to be "fine" academically, when in actuality they are frustrated and confused, feeling and knowing that they should be able to do more and yet unable to. For other 2e students, their challenges are so evident that they find the primary focus of their school day is on all that they struggle to do with little opportunity to shine or grow in their areas of strength.

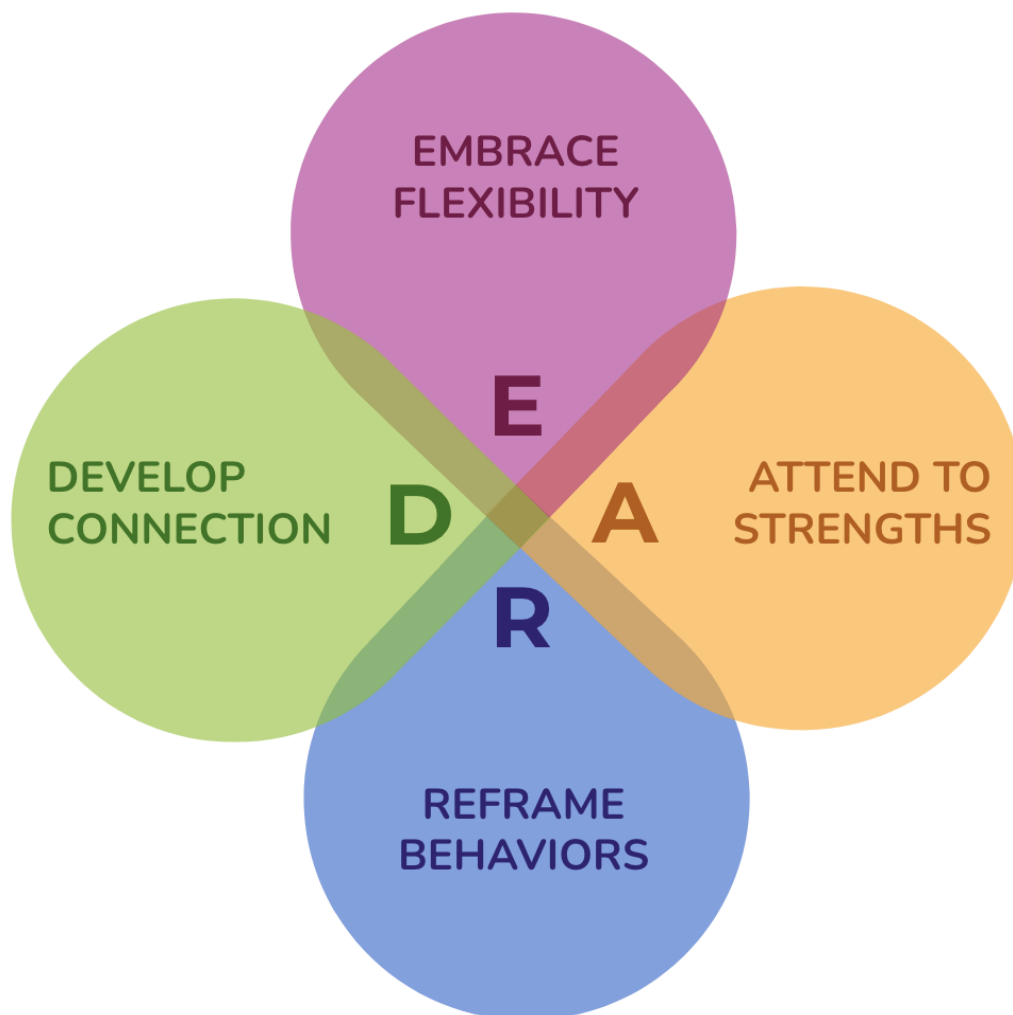
Estimates vary regarding the percentage of 2e kids, but we estimate conservatively that there are 9,000 2e learners in the K-12 system in Silicon Valley at any given time.

## THE DEAR REEL MODEL

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Now that you know about the experience of being twice-exceptional, we hope you're eager to consider strategies, ideas, and methods for supporting these students in your classrooms and schools. This whitepaper introduces the DEAR REEL model to help you achieve these goals.

Every time we conduct a workshop introducing educators to the twice-exceptional learning profile, they want to know more about how they can help these differently wired students. We developed the DEAR REEL model to provide a more concrete way to provide guidance on working with the 2e. The model is based on academic research and best practices from experienced educators about what works for these learners.



The DEAR REEL model consists of four lenses:

- **Develop Connection**
- **Embrace Flexibility**
- **Attend to Strengths**
- **Reframe Behaviors**

Each lens shares a lot with the others while also providing a valuable perspective on its own. As such, best practice suggestions for each area overlap somewhat with others. This is purposeful, because these four lenses work best when used together!

This document walks you step by step through each lens of the DEAR REEL model. For each lens, you will find:

- an overview and definitions;
- personal stories and examples;
- suggested articles, books, blog posts, podcasts and videos;
- additional online resources.

We also include detailed lists of practical suggestions by grade level for elementary, middle, and high school. These suggestions do not all need to be used all of the time, but instead provide a menu of options for your consideration. Try strategies and see works for your community and classroom.<sup>4</sup> We believe that you will find that it is not only 2e students who benefit from the strategies and ideas in this model; *ALL students will benefit when the DEAR REEL model is implemented!*

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<sup>4</sup> It's important to note that the DEAR REEL model does not cover suggestions related to screening, assessing, or identifying students to uncover learning differences nor does it suggest specific services to address interventions such as intensive reading tutoring for a dyslexic student or speech therapy for an autistic student. These are baseline responsibilities of any public school district and may or may not be addressed in an independent school setting. Regardless, we assume that these types of activities and services will be available to students as needed. In addition, we recognize that in an era of Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports, some students will require more intensive interventions at the Tier 3 level than we can address in this model. In other words, these strategies will not solve every problem for every learner, and different interventions and strategies may be necessary in some situations.



## DEVELOP CONNECTION

**WHEN CONNECTIONS ARE DEVELOPED IN THE CLASSROOM,** more students will feel psychologically safe, enabling them to participate fully in the classroom, ask for support, and take risks to learn and grow. Deeper connections make learning more joyful for both students and teachers, and build everyone’s sense of belonging.

### What do we mean by “connection”?

Educators who build connection intentionally...

- Create a classroom culture of belonging
- Learn about neurodiversity and about neurodivergence among their students
- Support students through a neurodiversity lens rather than viewing them according to neurotypical standards
- Self-reflect about the students who may “get under their skin” and commit to trying new approaches for connection
- Are approachable
- Share, as appropriate, about their own life and interests
- Ask about student interests and discuss them during open times
- Model mistake making

### Meet Ava

In elementary school, Ava’s teacher said, “She is eager and motivated to learn... she surpassed her reading goal by over 600%.” However, by middle school, Ava noticed that “teacher feedback shifted from commending my exceptional motivation to suggesting I turn in assignments more quickly and focus on ways to raise my grades.” After high school, Ava reflected, “Two of the greatest and most supportive teachers I’ve ever had were my Middle College history and English teachers. They understood the hardships my learning disability brings me, but didn’t choose to look at them as hardships. Instead of ridiculing the time it took me to turn in writing assignments, they celebrated the achievements and focused on the content of the assignments. Instead of being upset with me for needing to take a few minutes alone outside during class, they asked if there was any other way to help. They treated me as their equal in a way no adult had before, and it finally made me feel comfortable enough to believe in my abilities as a student.”



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## Learn More

BLOG POST [Strength-Based Ideas to Kick-Start the New Year and Get to Know Your Students](#) (REEL, 2022)

BLOG POST [Want to Foster A Sense of Belonging In Your Classroom? Try This](#) (Digital Promise, 2023)

ARTICLE [Compassionate Pedagogy for Neurodiversity in Higher Education](#) (Frontiers in Psychology, 2023)

ARTICLE [Helping Teachers Support 'Whole Learners': Going Beyond Academics to Foster Student Success](#) (The Bridgespan Group, 2019)

BOOK [Neurodiversity and Education](#) (Ellis et al., 2023)

PODCAST [Take Time to Build Connections](#) (Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud, 2023)

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## Online Resources

- [All It Takes: SEL for Safer Schools](#)
- [Along: Teacher Student Connections](#)
- [Neurodiversity Celebration Week](#)
- [The Neurodiversity Podcast](#)

### Personal Reflection

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*Think of a time when a teacher or mentor connected with you. How did that relationship make you feel? How do you embody that sense of connectedness with your students today? What's something new you might like to try?*

### Meet Alec

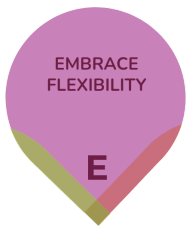
Alec, a 5th grade student, had recently immigrated from El Salvador. He was brilliant but also had untreated ADHD. Alec was new to the US and just beginning to learn the language and culture. Alec's teacher gave him a stack of blank notecards and they made a deal - at the end of each day they would trade cards: Alec gave his teacher one card with a Spanish word she needed to memorize and she gave him one card with a concept they had studied during the day. Once Alec wrote up a quiz for his teacher to take on a day where she'd given a math quiz. This connection helped his transition into the class, increasing his buy-in and sense of belonging.

### Meet Cindy

At the start of the school year, Cindy's 7th grade science teacher was frustrated. Cindy wasn't doing the assignments as directed and when she asked for help the teacher told her "think more deeply" hoping it would spur her on. One day the teacher realized this approach was upsetting Cindy and not solving the problem. He sat with Cindy at lunch and apologized and asked how he could truly help her. They jointly problem solved the quick support Cindy needed to get started on assignments. The teacher spent time outside of class asking Cindy about her hobbies and interests, and sharing his own. The teacher shared things that were difficult for him and modeled mistake-making. Cindy and the teacher developed a strong bond that helped her overcome challenges. Years later, Cindy and her teacher remain in touch.

## DEVELOPING CONNECTION AT EVERY LEVEL

Elementary grades	Middle school	High school
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider neurodiversity curricula which support inclusion and tolerance</li> <li>• Take time to learn each student’s interests and extracurriculars and ask about them</li> <li>• Build in creativity time and ask authentic questions about student creations</li> <li>• Instead of asking, “Why are you not doing X?” try saying, “I see that X is giving you trouble. Let’s work together to figure out some solutions.”</li> <li>• Speak with colleagues about students who you find difficult to connect with in order to get tips on what connections have worked for them</li> <li>• Share your success: let colleagues and parents know about successful connections you’ve made</li> <li>• Take time for personal reflection about students you connect to easily; use these strategies to connect with other kids</li> </ul>	<p><i>Everything in Elementary grades, plus:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with your school to review each student to ensure they have one friend / teacher / club that makes them feel connected</li> <li>• Go to sports games / plays / other school activities to connect beyond the classroom and show you care</li> <li>• Say “hi” in hallway and ask about their activities</li> <li>• Start a kindness club</li> <li>• Share why you love teaching and your desire to build relationships with students</li> <li>• Use homeroom/advisory to make authentic connections</li> <li>• Be intentional about acknowledging when you make a mistake and then walk students through your process for getting back on track; be open to students who may notice your mistakes and give them respectful options for letting you know</li> </ul>	<p><i>Everything in Middle school, plus:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a welcoming classroom space that students want to come and be part of</li> <li>• Invite students to office hours / tutorial; consider offering extra credit for students who make use of this opportunity</li> <li>• Remember that students with IEPs or who are struggling need more connection and a sense of trust than others</li> <li>• Work toward creating a culture at your school where neurodivergent students feel comfortable</li> <li>• Help students start a club around their area of interest or introduce them to students with similar interests</li> <li>• Support student-led neurodiversity advocacy efforts, like starting a Neurodiversity Club or honoring Neurodiversity Celebration Week</li> <li>• Group students in class around interests, including specific topics or how they show what they know (writing, acting, drawing, presenting, podcasting, etc.)</li> </ul>



## EMBRACE FLEXIBILITY

**WHEN FLEXIBILITY IS EMBRACED IN THE CLASSROOM**, more students will be able to access the content, and all students can experience engagement, learning, and success.

### What do we mean by “flexibility”?

Flexible educators...

- Use Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which allows for options to engage with content, process information, and demonstrate mastery
- Use backwards mapping to identify core learnings and essential understandings before the start of a unit, and carefully consider/plan/map different ways that students can show what they know in order to highlight their strengths
- When planning, find resources that allow alternative ways to access content (e.g., audio books, modeling software, podcasts, videos)
- Allow for multiple entry points into content through differentiation
- Consider the the physical learning environment intentionally through a neurodiversity lens
- Use inquiry and workshop models where appropriate
- Never forget that flexibility is not lowering standards!

### Meet John

When he was younger, John loved to sit and page through books, and listened intently while his parents read him huge chapter books. However, John struggled to read once he hit first grade. He spent hours after school with his teacher, but made no progress. Cognitively ready for advanced concepts, John was stuck at simple word books. Frustrated and bored, John hated reading and began to hide in his closet to avoid school. Once diagnosed as dyslexic, John started to receive intensive dyslexia tutoring. At the same time, John’s parents and teachers didn’t let his lack of ability to read words on a page stop him from feeding his desire to learn, excite his imagination, and delve into new worlds. His advanced processing speed meant that he enjoyed audiobooks at 3x speed. At 10 years old, John was listening to over 365 hours of audiobooks *per month* and had read over 425 multi-hour, advanced chapter books, including fiction, history, biography, science, and more. Audiobooks unlocked the world for John, providing him a way to satiate his eager imagination and intelligence, *alongside* his dyslexia reading tutoring.

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## Learn More

BLOG POST [Accommodations that Work](#) (REEL, 2023)

ARTICLE [Traditional Classroom Management vs. Student-centered Classroom Management](#) (KnowledgeWorks, 2024)

BOOK [Understanding by Design Meets Neuroscience](#) (Wiggins & McTighe, 2019)

BOOK [Unlearning: Changing Your Beliefs and Your Classroom with UDL](#) (Posey & Novak, 2020)

PODCAST [UDL in a Flexible Learning Landscape](#) (The Innovator's Mindset, 2021)

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## Online Resources

- [REEL Resources: Creativity & Flexibility](#)
- [Digital Promise: Learner Variability Project](#)
- [Example of a poetry unit becoming more flexible over time](#) (QEP Video Courses For Teachers, 2016)

### Personal Reflection

*Choose a unit/concept that you are familiar with. How might you modify it to enable all students to access the content if they exhibit ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, and/or have a narrow, but keen, range of interests? How might you expand options for student work to allow for more voice and choice?*

### Meet Heather

In second grade, Heather was assigned to make a model of any biome that appealed to her. Most students built a physical object, but Heather's fine motor skills were very limited. Instead, Heather's teacher allowed her to build her model virtually. She used the computer program Scratch, and programmed animals to talk to the viewer about their interactions with other animals in the Savannah. Heather's high abilities showed in the details of her work, which likely would have been missing if she had been required to make a physical model.

### Meet Ben

In 6th grade, Ben showed tremendous presentation and speaking skills and could remember everything he read about a topic of interest. While the class prepared to make a presentation, the teacher noticed Ben's amazing completed slides, and also observed Ben was struggling to create speaker notes for the presentation. Since the learning goal of the assignment was not writing skills, the teacher allowed Ben to skip creating speaker notes and go straight to presenting. Ben was able to use his tremendous memory and storytelling strengths to bypass his weakness. He even agreed to present first in the class, and set a very high bar for everyone who followed.

## EMBRACING FLEXIBILITY AT EVERY LEVEL

Elementary grades	Middle school	High school
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide multiple approaches to concepts such as manipulatives and concept mapping</li> <li>● Allow students to flex ahead to advanced content or focus on mastery at grade level as needed</li> <li>● Consider acceptable options for demonstrating mastery of learning goals</li> <li>● Allow the use of adaptive technology and accommodations to meet student need</li> <li>● Offer flexible seating, when possible, including standing desks, quiet zones, ball chairs</li> <li>● Provide opportunities for movement, such as a pacing lane in the back of the class, brain breaks, running errands</li> <li>● Provide workspace options including quiet spaces, low lighting options, collaborative spaces, etc.</li> <li>● Listen to and, when possible, implement a child's or parent's ideas for flexible ways to approach an assignment</li> <li>● If possible, make use of narrative report cards with a focus on areas of strength and growth</li> </ul>	<p><i>Everything in Elementary grades, plus:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Work towards mastery-based assessment and differentiation:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ reduce the number of required problems or assignments if student has shown mastery</li> <li>○ build in opportunities for revision and redemption</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Support student's documented accommodations</li> <li>● Experiment with ways to support students who may need more time to transition from class to class due to sensory overload (e.g., allowing these students to transition 1 to 2 minutes early; allow students to use roller backpacks they keep with them throughout the day)</li> <li>● Provide options to support students who struggle to remember to bring materials to class (e.g., allow them to keep a textbook in class and at home)</li> <li>● Make time for assignments to be completed during class time when students can access your support</li> </ul>	<p><i>Everything in Middle school, plus:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Keep the concept of content vs. medium in the forefront: focus on demonstration of mastery of core concepts</li> <li>● Be aware of and practice accommodations allowed for assessments, including standardized tests, such as testing in a quiet place, extended time</li> </ul>



## ATTEND TO STRENGTHS & INTERESTS

**WHEN STRENGTHS AND INTERESTS ARE EMBRACED IN THE CLASSROOM,** more students will experience self confidence, joy of learning, and a greater acceptance of self and others. Research indicates that strength-based approaches improve academic performance and engagement and lower incidences of challenging behaviors, absenteeism and tardiness.

### What do we mean by “strength-based”? Strengths-based educators...

- Recognize that strength and talent development improves student resilience and readiness for adulthood (career & life!)
- Value intrinsic motivation of interests and preferences in support of growth in challenge areas
- Provide time for strengths and interests within the school day
- Make accommodations and interventions more successful by weaving in strengths and interests
- Support development of learner self-esteem, self-efficacy, and positive self-concept

#### Personal Reflection

*What are ways you use your own personal strengths and interests to be the best teacher you can be? How do you feel when you're able to draw on your strengths and interests?*

#### Meet Henry

Henry loved drawing but struggled with writing. Instead of writing a blog post about a current event from the past week, Henry's teacher allowed him to draw his own political cartoons and post those instead. Henry enthusiastically completed the weekly cartoons since drawing was a particular strength and interest of his. Because of his talent, he was able to make sophisticated commentary through the drawings. The teacher could see that he understood the current events and was making deep connections. His teacher encouraged him to submit his work to the school newsletter and introduced him to the journalism teacher. Henry's cartoons became a regular feature and he went on to join the yearbook team at his middle school.

#### Meet Octavia

Octavia was a bright student with a passion for science-fiction writing. She was also dyslexic. As a dyslexic student with narrative strength, her teacher

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## Learn More

BLOG POST [Maximizing Student Success: A Strength-Based Pyramid](#) (REEL, 2024)

BLOG POST [About Strength Based IEPs](#) (Understood)

ARTICLE [A Strength-based, Whole Learner Teacher Guide](#) (Digital Promise, 2023)

ARTICLE [New Focus of Strength Based Learning](#) (NEA, 2022)

ARTICLE [Resource Guide to Strength Based Education](#) (St. Louis University)

ARTICLE [Strength-Based Classroom Strategies for Teachers](#) (Rawana et al., 2009)

ARTICLE [The Schoolwide Enrichment Model](#) (Renzulli, 2018)

REPORT [Establishing an Educational Plan Through a Collaborative Problem Solving Model](#) (Colorado Department of Education, 2009)

BOOK [Teaching the Twice Exceptional Learner](#) (Kircher-Morris, 2021)

VIDEO [How Strength-Based Experiences Engage & Nurture Neurodivergent Students](#) (Stanford Neurodiversity Summit, 2021)

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## Online Resources

- [REEL Resources: Strength & Interest Development](#)
- [Learner Variability Navigator: Strengths-based Approach](#) (Digital Promise)
- [Neurodiversity Strengths Checklist](#) (Montgomery County Public Schools, MD; Armstrong, 2012)

looked for ways to encourage Octavia’s strengths. Her teacher created a project with private, ungraded journals to give personalized feedback. He offered interest-based reading and writing projects and encouraged all students to consider science-fiction and non-fiction options, and allowed students to use audiobooks if they preferred. He introduced several formats for note-taking, including “Smart” pens and note sketching. When introducing a new unit, he provided the “big picture” before diving into details. All of these strategies played to Octavia’s strengths and allowed her to grow and shine.

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### ***Meet Sam, Jacob, and Lance***

When their teacher needed to see the understanding of content in 6th-grade ancient civilizations class, Sam, Jacob, and Lance pooled their Legos together and made a beautiful exhibit of ancient India. Because all three boys had severe executive functioning issues they made a video of their exhibit with a recording of all the parts explained rather than submitting a written paper. Later in the year, their teacher needed to see the skill of a developed multiple-paragraph essay; students were allowed to choose any issue that spanned multiple civilizations and compare and contrast. These three boys worked together in a small group with extra scaffolding. Because the project was aligned with their areas of interest, they were motivated to persist, even through some of the intense struggles they faced during the writing process.

**Q: What is the difference between “strengths” and “interests”?**

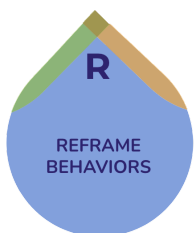
**Strengths** are talents and skills that an individual does better than they do other things. Every learner has unique strengths. While academic strengths may be identified through assessment or work portfolio review, identifying a student’s personal strengths (i.e., imagination, resilience, sense of humor, determination, memory, spatial skills) often requires a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the student.

**Interests** and passions are areas that learners enjoy exploring or engaging in. Learners will often have vast knowledge in these areas and they may correlate with or incorporate personal strengths (but not necessarily); for example, they may be strong in math computation but have very little interest in becoming a mathematician.

## ATTENDING TO STRENGTHS & INTERESTS AT EVERY LEVEL

Elementary grades	Middle school	High school
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organize interest centers that can be used as part of the core curriculum and/or for extension/enrichment projects</li> <li>Establish intentional collaborative groups based on student interests</li> <li>Carve out independent time and space for pursuing interests, such as passion projects or “genius” hour</li> <li>Give students menus &amp; options to choose how to show what they know</li> <li>Encourage after-school enrichment programs</li> <li>Advocate for strength-based IEP goals</li> <li>Provide access to acceleration in strength areas</li> </ul>	<p><i>Everything in Elementary grades, plus:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support access to interest-based clubs</li> <li>Connect students to real-world mentors</li> <li>Consider the Schoolwide Enrichment Model to create interest-based elective programming</li> <li>Prioritize electives over intervention- don’t replace elective time with to fit in intervention or tutoring</li> </ul>	<p><i>Everything in Middle school, plus:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implement co-teaching in advanced subjects so all students with an interest in a topic can access deeper, advanced learning</li> <li>Look for opportunities to weave strengths into transition planning</li> </ul>





## REFRAME BEHAVIORS

**WHEN WE REFRAME CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS**, recognizing that children’s behaviors and responses are clues to how they are experiencing and responding to the world around them, more students will be able to access the curriculum, the focus within the classroom will center on learning, and the root of students’ struggles can be uncovered and addressed rather than just managing the surface level.

### What do we mean by “reframe behaviors”?

Educators who intentionally reframe student behaviors keep in mind that...

- Neurodivergent ways of participating and communicating may look different than expected, and it is important to avoid misinterpreting neurodivergence as a behavior issue. Common neurodivergent communication styles and self-regulation strategies include: avoiding eye contact, moving one’s body to engage in learning, direct communication or questioning, differences in tone of voice, etc.
- When challenging behavior does occur, it should be thought of as communication of an underlying problem or need
- While it can be helpful to observe what happened right before a student struggled, it’s important to remember that many factors can contribute to a student’s behavior beyond just the situation that immediately preceded the challenge (also sometimes known as the “antecedent”)

### Meet Kelsey

Kelsey was a bright elementary school student who started kindergarten reading chapter books and writing poetry, some of which her teacher used as part of the class’ poetry unit. However, by second grade, she hadn’t made any friends, could often be found reading a book instead of doing her work, and was picking at her skin so badly she had at least two dozen visible scabs. In 6th grade, she began lashing out verbally at other students for whistling and humming, and then she started having full scale panic attacks and hiding in the bathroom. Until this time, everyone was a little confused by Kelsey’s behaviors. Once those behaviors impacted her fellow students and teachers, they were flagged as problematic. Shortly thereafter, she was assessed and identified as autistic with general anxiety. The nature of her needs had been easy to overlook due to her strong verbal skills and internalizing presentation of sensory overwhelm and anxiety.

- It is important to collaborate with the student, parent, and providers to understand and solve underlying problems, rather than focusing on eliminating behaviors
- Both internalizing and externalizing behaviors can be signs of potential need for intervention; internalizing behaviors may include high anxiety, skin picking, situational mutism/not speaking, negative self talk, etc. whereas externalizing behaviors may involve outbursts, obvious frustration, blurting, etc.
- Student presentation can be both asynchronous/highly inconsistent - just because a student is strong in some areas or able to handle expectations at certain times, does not mean that challenging behavior is willful
- All children do well when they can

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## Learn More

BLOG SERIES [Living & Learning 2e](#) (REEL, 2022)

ARTICLE [How Schools Can Support Neurodiverse Students](#) (Child Mind Institute, 2023)

BOOK [Lost at School](#) (Greene, 2014)

BOOK [Beyond Behaviors](#) (Delahooke, 2019)

BOOK [Self-Reg](#) (Shanker, 2017)

PODCAST [Using Proactive and Collaborative Solutions to Support the Behavior of All Learners](#) (Think Inclusive, 2022)

VIDEO [2e Emotional Regulation](#) (REEL; Kircher-Morris, 2024)

## Meet Serena

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Serena was a bright middle school student with excellent grades. In light of her academic strengths, teachers were perplexed by the fact that she was routinely out of her seat wandering around the classroom, and saw the behaviors as deliberate and under her control. As a result, Serena was regularly sent to the office. It wasn't until high school that Serena was diagnosed with ADHD and her school difficulties made more sense to her. When her middle school principal learned years later about Serena's journey, it all clicked and made the principal wonder if Serena's middle school experience might have been more positive had teachers understood her behaviors as a manifestation of her disability and accommodated her need for movement.

## Meet Jonah

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Jonah (2nd grade) was highly gifted and had sensory processing issues. When he was bored he would put his shirt over his head and rub his chest and belly, which made classmates uncomfortable. When the teacher talked privately with Jonah, Jonah shared that this was a coping strategy to help him feel more comfortable in the classroom. The teacher went to the fabric store and made some small boards covered with different fabrics that Jonah could play with. Jonah enjoyed the different sensations and learned that this was a great way to have his sensory needs met. He felt more comfortable in the classroom and could engage more with his peers.

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## Online Resources

- [REEL Resources: Social & Emotional Development](#)
- [Autism Level Up](#)
- [Lives in the Balance](#)
- [North Star Paths](#)

### Personal Reflection

*Think about a student who has exhibited challenging behavior. How might you reframe this behavior to consider possible neurodivergence or underlying needs and concerns?*

### Meet Ethan

Ethan was an autistic second grade student who was gifted in math and analytical reasoning, but struggled with overwhelm in the classroom, often shutting down and refusing to work. To encourage Ethan to participate, the school team came up with a behavior plan in which Ethan would earn points for participation, then earn a reward for five days of meeting participation targets. Early into this system, Ethan had had four great days and was excited to earn his fifth day reward. That day the teacher assigned a writing task of turning a piece of nonfiction informational writing into a creative story. Ethan's very literal, analytical mind really struggled with this task and he took out his sensory putty and played with it for the entire writing period. When Ethan was told he wouldn't earn his reward he became angry, hid in some bushes, and swung a stick at whoever came by. After this incident, Ethan shared his perspective with his mom who was able to work collaboratively with the team to understand Ethan's concerns. They then were able to put a more appropriate support plan in place in which teachers would notice early signs of disengagement and check in to see how they could support.

## REFRAMING BEHAVIORS AT EVERY LEVEL

Elementary grades	Middle school	High school
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Have dedicated areas both for quiet breaks and for getting energy out</li> <li>● Offer varied work space options (floor, pillows, desks, quiet corner, etc.)</li> <li>● Allow movement, standing, and pacing during learning times as well as sensory tools / fidgets to all students as needed; this likely will require explicit instruction and guidelines about proper usage as students adjust to these options</li> <li>● Utilize a check-in system / board for students to identify how they are feeling and follow up with those who are in need</li> <li>● Use collaborative problem solving with the child and parent to uncover underlying concerns and work together to find a solution that meets everyone's needs</li> <li>● In the moment when a child is struggling, co-regulate with students (e.g., purposeful deep breathing, joint calming activities); problem solve later once everyone is calmer</li> <li>● Attend to your own emotional regulation to create stronger bonds with students</li> </ul>	<p><i>Same concepts as in Elementary grades, modified for the context:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Implement advisory system to make sure all students have a point person on campus</li> <li>● Notice disengagement and/or avoidance and check in with the student as needed (behaviors may be more subtle as children mature - outbursts in elementary school often evolve into anxiety in middle and high school)</li> <li>● Collaborate with the student's point person (case manager, counselor, advisor, etc.) to take the lead on collaborative problem solving</li> <li>● Track agreed upon accommodations and supports either in IEP or school communication system so that all teachers are aware of what's going on</li> <li>● Work with the school to create sensory safe rooms and a school culture where it's encouraged for all students to use them as needed</li> </ul>	<p><i>Everything in Middle school, plus:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pay heightened attention to signs of disengagement and decreased participation</li> <li>● Look for patterns in struggles (particular classes, type of work, etc.) and have school counselor (or other adult with strong relationship) work with student to uncover what is not working about those particular contexts</li> <li>● Increase emphasis on student self-advocacy; teach specific self-advocacy skills in an intentional way, reducing scaffolding as the student moves through the grade levels</li> <li>● Consider alternate learning contexts that better meet the child's energy levels and needs (i.e., community college classes, dual enrollment, online options, etc.)</li> </ul>

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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As Executive Director of REEL, Abby leads strategic planning and oversees REEL's programming for parents and educators. Abby is an interaction designer, and spent several years in tech and startups before being inspired by the various experiences of her three children to pivot into education. She is currently a doctoral candidate at Bridges Graduate School of Cognitive Diversity in Education. Abby received her Master's degree in Human-Computer Interaction from Carnegie Mellon University and her undergraduate degree from NYU. She can be reached at [abby@reel2e.org](mailto:abby@reel2e.org).

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Yael co-founded REEL in support of a community of parents at her local elementary school who were seeking new educational strategies for their children. Yael has two 2e sons in middle and high school. Prior to her work with REEL, Yael co-founded start-ups in the parenting community and children's creativity spaces. She has served on the board and advisory committees for several education-based non-profits. Yael received her BS and MS in Computer Science from Stanford University. She can be reached at [yael@reel2e.org](mailto:yael@reel2e.org).

### **Sarah Wischnia, Educator Content Development Specialist**

Sarah is a career educator and mom to two 2e boys. She holds a PhD in Teacher Education from Stanford, an MA in Education from Berkeley, and a BA in Psychology from UCLA. Over the course of her career, Sarah has worked as a teacher, lecturer, consultant and coach. She is passionate about differentiated and equitable instruction as well as helping reframe challenging student behaviors that occur in the classroom. Sarah is thrilled to meld her two worlds as an educator and parent in her work with the REEL team. She can be reached at [sarah@reel2e.org](mailto:sarah@reel2e.org).

### **Callie Turk, Co-founder & Board Member**

Callie co-founded REEL to help build understanding and awareness about twice-exceptional learners in Silicon Valley. Callie is the mom of three teens, one of whom is 2e. Callie draws on her 15-plus year career working with ed tech companies and school districts at the cutting edge of educator professional learning. Callie received her MBA from Stanford University and BS from Miami University (Ohio). She is a doctoral student with the Bridges Graduate School of Cognitive Diversity in Education. She can be reached at [callie@reel2e.org](mailto:callie@reel2e.org).

## THANK YOU!

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