
A PRACTICAL FIELD GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS AND YOUTH-SERVING ADULTS

The Perception Check Field Guide

Five questions to ask before you decide what a behavior means



The first explanation is not always the whole story.

This guide helps you slow down the leap from what you saw to what you think it means - so your next response can protect dignity, maintain accountability, and make room for better information.

BEN SENTER

Youth-development practitioner | Training designer | Autistic + ADHD perspective

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A NOTE FROM BEN

A better question can change what happens next.



I created this guide because I know what it is like to move through school and the world with a brain that does not always match the environment around it.

Long before I understood that I was Autistic and had ADHD, adults could see my behavior without always seeing what sat underneath it. My career began with City Year, supporting middle-school students around social-emotional learning. Since 2002, I have kept returning to the same question: what becomes possible when the adults around a young person get curious before they get certain?

WHY THIS GUIDE IS FREE

Young people should not have to wait for every adult in their lives to attend a training before being met with greater curiosity and understanding.

This guide is free because even one thoughtful pause can change what happens next.

The deeper work - building shared language, practicing difficult situations, examining organizational patterns, and creating sustainable change - is where training, collaboration, and continued partnership begin.

Use this guide to interrupt certainty, not to replace a relationship. The goal is not to guess the 'right' hidden reason. The goal is to make a safer, wiser next move while you learn more.

START HERE

A behavior is data. The meaning is a hypothesis.

We often experience these as one instant thought. They are actually three different moves.

01**OBSERVATION**

What a camera or microphone could record.

EXAMPLE

Jordan closes the laptop, looks away, and says, 'I'm not doing this.'

02**INTERPRETATION**

The meaning your brain adds.

EXAMPLE

Jordan is disrespectful, defiant, lazy, or trying to get attention.

03**RESPONSE**

What you do because of that meaning.

EXAMPLE

Correct publicly, remove a privilege, demand compliance, or pause and inquire.

The danger is not having an interpretation.

The danger is forgetting that it is an interpretation - and responding as though it were proven fact.

TRY THIS LANGUAGE

Instead of:

'Jordan is refusing to work.'

Try:

'I saw Jordan close the laptop and heard them say they were not doing the task. I need more information.'

THE PERCEPTION CHECK

Five questions. One intentional pause.

You do not need to answer every question perfectly. You need enough distance from your first story to choose a more useful next step.

1

What did I actually observe?

Strip away labels. Name only what could be seen or heard.

2

What story did my brain add?

Say the interpretation plainly. Naming it makes it easier to examine.

3

What else could be true?

Generate at least three plausible explanations. Possibility is not proof.

4

What information is missing?

Look for context, communication, sensory load, regulation, expectations, skills, and environment.

5

What response preserves dignity and accountability?

Choose the smallest response that supports safety, learning, repair, and the next useful conversation.

The aim is not certainty. It is responsible curiosity.

Pause long enough to keep your assumption from becoming someone else's consequence.

USING THE FIVE QUESTIONS

What to notice when you slow the moment down

1 **Observe** Use verbs, not verdicts.

Avoid words like rude, manipulative, unmotivated, overreacting, or attention-seeking. Those may feel descriptive, but they already contain a conclusion.

2 **Name the story** Your first story is shaped by your own history.

Ask what expectation, fear, policy, pressure, identity, or past experience is influencing your read of the moment.

3 **Widen the frame** Three alternatives loosen certainty.

Could this involve unclear directions, overwhelm, fatigue, pain, anxiety, a communication mismatch, a lagging skill, peer dynamics, or something outside the room?

4 **Find the gap** Do not diagnose from a distance.

Ask the young person when possible. Check patterns, timing, demands, transitions, sensory conditions, relationships, and what happened before and after.

5 **Choose the next move** Dignity and accountability can coexist.

Regulate the room. Clarify the expectation. Offer a workable choice. Repair harm. Revisit the pattern later. Document observable facts, not character judgments.

A perception check is not permission to ignore harm. It is a way to respond to harm without inventing motives, escalating avoidably, or reducing a young person to their hardest moment.

FIELD APPLICATION

The group project that looked like refusal

THE MOMENT

During a noisy middle-school program, Maya pushes the supply bin away, puts both hands over her ears, and says, 'This is stupid. I'm not doing it.' Two peers laugh. The activity leader feels the whole room watching.

1**What was observed?**

Maya pushed the bin away, covered her ears, used those words, and stopped participating.

2**What story appeared?**

She is disrespecting me. She is trying to get out of the activity. If I do not act now, I will lose the group.

3**What else could be true?**

The noise is painful. The task is unclear. Peer laughter raised the stakes. She is anxious about failing. She needs a break but lacks a safe way to request one.

4**What is missing?**

Maya's account. Whether this pattern appears in noise, group work, transitions, or public correction. What support has helped before.

5**What protects dignity + accountability?**

Lower the audience and sensory load first. Offer a brief reset and a concrete re-entry choice. Address the language privately, then plan a usable way to signal overwhelm next time.

Notice: the response still holds an expectation. It simply refuses to confuse immediate compliance with learning, or public control with effective leadership.

GUIDED REFLECTION

Run a real moment through the check

Choose a moment that left you frustrated, confused, or certain. Write briefly. Specific is more useful than polished.

1

OBSERVE

What did you see and hear? What would a camera capture?

2

NAME THE STORY

What meaning, motive, or character judgment did your brain add?

3

WIDEN THE FRAME

List three other explanations that could fit the same facts.

4

FIND THE GAP

What information, context, or perspective is missing? How might you get it?

5

CHOOSE THE NEXT MOVE

What response supports safety, dignity, accountability, and learning?

One sentence to carry forward: The next time I notice myself deciding quickly, I will...

CURIOSITY WITH BACKBONE

What this practice does - and does not - ask of you

CURIOSITY MEANS

- Separating observable facts from the story attached to them.
- Making room for the young person's perspective.
- Checking environment, expectations, communication, and skills.
- Using the least escalatory effective response.
- Holding boundaries without assigning a damaging identity.

CURIOSITY DOES NOT MEAN

- Ignoring immediate safety needs.
- Removing every expectation or consequence.
- Excusing harm or abandoning repair.
- Diagnosing autism, trauma, anxiety, or any condition.
- Waiting forever for perfect information before acting.

A USEFUL SEQUENCE**1****STABILIZE** Reduce immediate risk or escalation.**2****CHECK** Separate fact, story, and missing information.**3****RESPOND** Choose a proportionate next move.**4****RETURN** Revisit, repair, and plan when the moment is cooler.

Accountability asks: What happened, who was affected, what support or repair is needed, and what will help next time? Shame asks: What is wrong with you?

PRINT + KEEP

The Pocket Perception Check

Print this page, cut along the dotted line, fold at the center, and keep the card near the places where hard moments happen.

POCKET FIELD CARD

Before you
decide what
it means...

?

Pause long enough to keep
your assumption from
becoming someone else's
consequence.

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THE FIVE QUESTIONS

- 1 What did I actually observe?
- 2 What story did my brain add?
- 3 What else could be true?
- 4 What information is missing?
- 5 What response preserves dignity and accountability?

IN THE MOMENT

Lower the audience. Lower the heat. State what you observed. Ask one honest question. Offer a workable next step. Return later for

Curiosity is not the absence of accountability. It is how accountability becomes more accurate.

CUT • FOLD • KEEP CLOSE

CONTINUE THE CAMPAIGN

A pause can change a moment. Shared practice can change a culture.

If five questions changed how you understood one moment, imagine what a shared practice could change across an entire team.

Ben offers collaborative, tailored learning experiences for schools, after-school programs, nonprofits, and youth-serving teams. Available in 60- or 90-minute, half-day, and full-day formats, in person or virtually.

[START A CONVERSATION](#)

ABOUT BEN SENTER



Ben Senter is a youth-development practitioner, training designer, and facilitator whose work combines lived Autistic and ADHD perspective with more than two decades of educational practice. Since 2002, he has developed and delivered 70+ trainings to more than 1,000 participants and directly supervised 250+ people. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Social Work from Western Michigan University and currently develops, leads, and manages middle-school after-school programming.

PROFESSIONAL SCOPE

Ben is not a medical doctor, therapist, neuroscientist, or diagnostic professional. This guide offers lived, educational, and practice-based perspective - not diagnosis, treatment, clinical assessment, or medical advice. One neurodivergent person's experience cannot represent every Autistic or ADHD person. Listen to individuals, honor their communication, and consult qualified professionals when clinical guidance is needed.

RESEARCH + CONTINUED LEARNING

1. Milton, D. E. M. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: the double empathy problem. *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883-887. doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.710008
2. Milton, D., Gurbuz, E., & Lopez, B. (2022). The double empathy problem: Ten years on. *Autism*, 26(8), 1901-1903. doi.org/10.1177/13623613221129123
3. SAMHSA. Trauma-Informed Care. Programs are encouraged to realize trauma's impact, recognize signs, respond in practice, and resist retraumatization. [samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence/trauma-informed-care](https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence/trauma-informed-care)
4. Center on PBIS. Functional behavior assessment resources emphasize gathering data about events before and after behavior to develop support plans. [pbis.org](https://www.pbis.org)

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