

ACT MATRIX IN SCHOOLS

BY ROB SPAIN, M.S., BCBA, IBA

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I'm the founder of BehaviorSchool.com. For many years, I've worked in schools supporting students, staff, and families using evidence-based behavioral science. My focus has been applying Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) and the ACT Matrix to help students increase psychological flexibility, reduce behaviors that conflict with their values, and build meaningful engagement in learning.

This book is a practical guide based on that experience. My hope is that it will equip school-based professionals with tools they can immediately use to support students in values-driven growth.

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PROLOGUE

For years, I've applied the ACT Matrix in schools as both a practitioner and mentor. I've seen how this simple visual tool can shift students from resistance and disruption to greater willingness, flexibility, and alignment with their values. Classrooms that once struggled became more engaged, and teachers reported fewer behaviors that pulled students away from learning and more authentic participation, even from their most reluctant learners.

This guide is built on those experiences and designed to give you practical steps for using the ACT Matrix in your own setting. It supports values-based coaching and behavior planning, and is intended to complement—not replace—individualized instruction, counseling, or clinical treatment.

It is important to remember that the ACT Matrix is only a brief introduction to Acceptance and Commitment Training and represents just one of many tools that can be used effectively with students in school settings. If you find this approach helpful, you may want to explore additional ACT resources to deepen your understanding and expand the strategies available for supporting students.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Spain is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA), International Behavior Analyst (IBA), and the founder of BehaviorSchool.com. He has spent years working in public schools, applying evidence-based strategies like Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) to help students grow in psychological flexibility, reduce disruptive behaviors, and connect with what matters most to them. Rob's mission is to make behavior analysis practical, accessible, and effective for educators and students alike.

1. INTRO TO THE MATRIX

The ACT Matrix is a visual framework that builds **psychological flexibility**—helping students choose actions guided by values (Toward moves) even when unhelpful thoughts/feelings show up (Away pulls).

Why Use It?

The ACT Matrix is a visual framework developed by Polk & Schoendorff (2016) that builds **psychological flexibility**—the ability to act on values even in the presence of unhelpful thoughts and feelings. Unlike many interventions focused only on reducing problem behaviors, the Matrix helps students link their choices to **personally meaningful values**.

- **Research in schools** shows ACT-based approaches can improve wellbeing, reduce distress, and increase engagement, with psychological flexibility as the key driver of change (Knight & Samuel, 2022).
- **Youth measures** like the AFQ-Y (Greco et al., 2008) and CompACT-Y (Morey et al., 2024) can be used as screeners or progress checks—not diagnostic tools.
- The Matrix is an effective “sorting” tool for mapping experiences in real time and has been successfully adapted for caregivers, educators, and school-based professionals (Askew, 2022; Kurumiya et al., 2022).

How to Introduce It

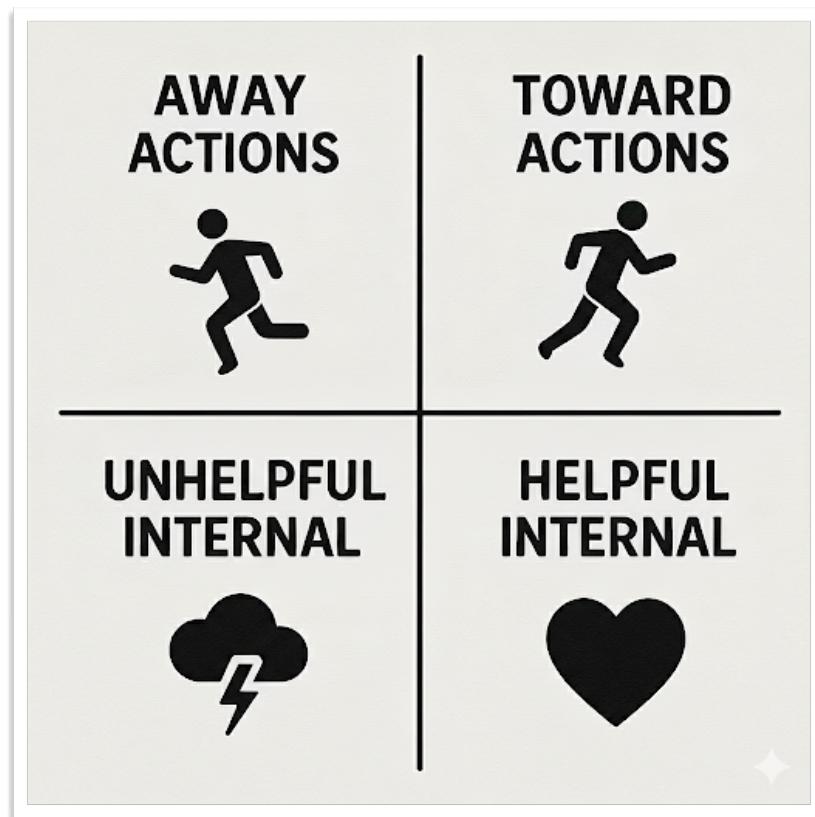
Before using the Matrix with a student, review the process yourself so you can stay focused on purpose, not memorized steps. Keep it

simple and normalize internal experiences. For example, start by saying:

“Everyone brings their own thoughts, feelings, and challenges into the classroom. The Matrix is a way to notice those and still make choices that help us grow.”

Teachers and staff consistently report that once students see their **own values** at the center of this work, resistance drops and participation rises. One veteran teacher put it this way:

“This tool helps us move beyond compliance. It gives us a language for building resilience and flexibility in a way students understand.”



2. THE SET UP

Start introducing the ACT Matrix.

What to draw: A large cross that creates four boxes, labeled:

Upper Right: Toward Actions (choices that align with values)

Upper Left: Away Actions (choices that pull away from values, even if they feel good now)

Lower Right: Helpful Internal (thoughts/feelings that support values)

Lower Left: Unhelpful Internal (thoughts/feelings that make values-based action harder)

What to say:

“Everyone has tough thoughts and feelings. That’s normal. But even when those show up, we can still choose actions that move us toward the kind of person we want to be.”

Examples to seed the student in their voice:

- **Helpful Internal:** “Mistakes help me learn,” “I can try once.”
- **Unhelpful Internal:** “I’ll look dumb,” “This is pointless,” racing heart.

- **Toward:** Asking for help, starting the first problem, joining the group.
- **Away:** Head down, skipping, distracting others.

Key Takeaway

The power of the ACT Matrix lies in its **simplicity and flexibility**:

- Students connect choices to their values.
- Staff gain a shared framework for guiding meaningful conversations.
- It works in **individual, small group, and classroom settings.**

With practice, you'll know when to follow the steps exactly and when to adapt them to meet students where they are. That adaptability is what makes the ACT Matrix such a powerful tool in schools.

The ACT Matrix has four quadrants:

Helpful Internal Thoughts and Feelings: Support values.

- Lower Right

Unhelpful Internal Thoughts and Feelings: Pull away from values.

- Lower Left

Toward Actions: Actions that align with values.

- Upper Right

Away Actions: Actions that move away from values, even if they feel good now.

- Upper Left

ONE LINE YOU CAN SAY: “EVERYONE HAS TOUGH THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS. WE CAN STILL CHOOSE ACTIONS THAT MOVE US TOWARD WHO WE WANT TO BE.”



3. STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Use the provided sample questions exactly as written to start, since they're designed to be student-friendly and easy to answer. For example, ask, "Who do you want to be known as?" or "What matters enough that it's still worth doing even when it's hard?" As students respond, record their answers on the worksheet to make their thinking visible. This creates a shared reference point you can return to later. Always listen actively and validate their responses to build trust and engagement.

1) VALUES DISCOVERY (2–6 MINUTES)

"What kind of classmate/friend/learner do you want to be this month?"

"If a teacher described you on your best day, what would they say?"

"What matters enough that it's still worth doing even when it's hard?"

2) MAP INTERNAL EXPERIENCES (NORMALIZE; 2–5 MINUTES)

"What thoughts pop up when things get hard?"

"Where do you feel stress in your body? How do you know you're getting pulled away?"

Coach language: "That's a normal thought/feeling. Thanks, mind/body, for the signal."

3) TOWARD VS. AWAY (BEHAVIOR SORTING; 5-10 MINUTES)

“Show me two choices you made today—one that moved you toward your values, one that moved you away.

“What was the short-term payoff of the away move? What’s the long-term cost?”

“What’s a tiny Toward move you can do **even if** the tough feeling stays?”



4) PRACTICE PLANS (1-3 MINUTES)

“If that thought/feeling shows up again, what one small Toward move will you try?”

“Who on campus can support you when you’re doing Toward moves?”

4. VALUES FIRST

The ACT Matrix always begins with student-owned values because values act as the compass for every decision that follows. If staff, parents, or outside expectations drive the process, the Matrix risks becoming just another compliance tool instead of a framework for building genuine psychological flexibility.

When students name their own values—such as being a good friend, learning new things, or showing courage—they take ownership. The motivation comes from within, not imposed from outside. This shift builds intrinsic motivation, which research shows produces more lasting behavior change than external rewards or punishments.

Centering the student's values also communicates respect and autonomy. It tells the student: Your voice matters. What you care about is important. For students with a history of conflict with authority, this respect often lowers resistance. Many disengaged or disruptive students begin to re-engage once they see the focus is on their values rather than adult expectations.

Values also keep the Matrix flexible. Students may discover that different values guide them in different contexts—kindness with friends, perseverance in academics, responsibility at home. Honoring this variety helps students see themselves as whole people whose choices can be guided across settings.



THE ACT MATRIX WORKS BECAUSE IT HELPS STUDENTS PRACTICE CHOOSING ACTIONS ALIGNED WITH WHAT MATTERS TO THEM—NOT JUST TO OTHERS.

That's what makes it more than a behavior management tool; it's a framework for resilience, self-determination, and growth. That distinction is what makes it more than a behavior management tool; it's a framework for building resilience, self-determination, and growth.

VALUES CARD SORT

Values can feel abstract, so card sorts make them concrete and visual. Each card lists a single value (e.g., Kindness, Courage, Learning, Friendship). Students review and sort the cards into three piles:

Most Important – values that matter most right now

Important – values that matter but are less central

Less Important – values that matter somewhat but not as much

From there, students select 3–5 top values to guide their choices for the week. This process narrows options, reduces overwhelm, and ensures the ACT Matrix reflects what is personally meaningful to the student.

4. CLASSIFICATION CODEBOOK

Sorting behaviors and statements into the ACT Matrix is a way of making the invisible visible. By organizing what students do, say, and feel into clear categories, we can better understand whether their choices are moving them toward their values or away from them. This process provides both staff and students with a simple framework for noticing patterns and identifying opportunities for growth. Starting with the student's own values keeps the work personalized and meaningful, while consistent sorting ensures reliable data and actionable feedback.

QUICK REFERENCE

Toward Move (T): Observable action aligned with a stated value.
Example: Raises hand for help when stuck.

Away Move (A): Observable action primarily to escape/avoid/disengage from aversive thoughts, feelings, or tasks.
Example: Puts head down, refuses task, makes off-topic jokes to avoid work.

Helpful Internal (HI): Self-statements/feelings that support valued action.
Example: “Mistakes help me learn,” feeling curious, calm focus.

Unhelpful Internal (UI): Self-statements/feelings that cue avoidance.
Example: “I’ll fail anyway,” anxiety, shame spike, racing heart.

HOW TO SORT BEHAVIORS AND STATEMENTS INTO QUADRANTS

Start with the student's values. Look at the values the student identified (e.g., Learning, Kindness, Courage). Every decision you make should be tied back to these values so the process stays personalized.

Ask: What function does the behavior serve?

If the behavior helps the student move closer to their values, classify it as a Toward Move (T).

If the behavior mainly avoids discomfort, embarrassment, or difficult work, classify it as an Away Move (A).

Pay attention to internal statements and feelings. If the student's thought or feeling makes it easier to act on values, mark it as Helpful Internal (HI).

If the thought or feeling pushes them to avoid or withdraw, mark it as Unhelpful Internal (UI).

Count even the small wins. Tiny actions (like opening a book, asking one question, or sitting with a group for a minute) all count as Toward Moves. These are meaningful steps toward their values.

Be consistent. Apply the same rules across settings and sessions. Consistency builds reliable data and allows you to give the student clear, specific feedback on their growth.

5. LINKING TO THE ABC

Integrating Private Experiences Into Functional Assessment. In a traditional Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA), the Antecedent describes what triggers behavior, the Behavior is the observable action, and the Consequence is what maintains that behavior. Acceptance and Commitment Training and the ACT Matrix expands this analysis by making private experiences—thoughts, feelings, and body sensations—part of the picture.

These internal events often function like antecedents, setting the stage for behavior, even if no external trigger is visible.

Antecedents: Include both external situations (e.g., a pop quiz, peer conflict) and internal experiences (e.g., the thought “I will fail”, a racing heart, or a knot in the stomach).

Behavior: Classified not just by how it looks but by whether it moves the student toward their values or away from them. Asking for help moves the student toward learning; joking to distract peers moves the student away from learning.

Consequences: Consider both the immediate effect and the long-term outcome. Avoiding work often brings quick relief, but undermines growth. Moving toward values often feels harder in the short term but builds skills, resilience, and genuine connection.

Accepting Uncomfortable Internal Experiences

A central aim of the ACT Matrix is helping students learn that unhelpful internal thoughts and feelings are normal and safe to notice. Instead of trying to eliminate them, students can practice

acceptance—allowing those experiences to be present without letting them dictate behavior.

Example:

Antecedent: Pop quiz begins → thought: “I’m not smart enough.”

Behavioral fork:

Away Move: Student puts head down → feels immediate relief but misses chance to learn.

Toward Move: Student begins the first problem, even while the thought “I can’t do this” is still there.

Consequence:

Away → temporary comfort, loss of learning.

Toward → increased contact with value of persistence, chance for mastery.

The Role of Mindfulness and Defusion

Mindfulness is noticing what is happening in the present moment —thoughts, feelings, and surroundings—without judgment. In the classroom, this may look like a student pausing to notice their racing heart before beginning a task.

Defusion is a specific skill for changing one’s relationship with thoughts—stepping back and seeing them as “just thoughts” rather than literal truths. For example, holding the thought “I will fail” lightly, labeling it as “I’m noticing my mind is saying I will fail”, and still attempting the problem.

These processes support the student in accepting discomfort while choosing toward actions aligned with values. They represent just a few of the many skills that can be developed through the

acceptance and commitment process, but they are some of the strategies we use most often in school-based practice

Putting It Together: The ACT-Infused ABC Pathway

1. Identify the external antecedent and the linked unhelpful internal experience.

Example: Teacher announces quiz → student feels anxious and thinks, “I’ll embarrass myself.”

2. Map the behavior through the Matrix.

- Away Move: Refuses to start.
- Toward Move: Attempts at least one item.

3. Examine the consequence.

Away → temporary reduction in anxiety, avoidance of possible failure.

Toward → practice, engagement, gradual confidence, alignment with values.

4. Support with acceptance and defusion.

Teach student to notice the thought or feeling without fighting it.

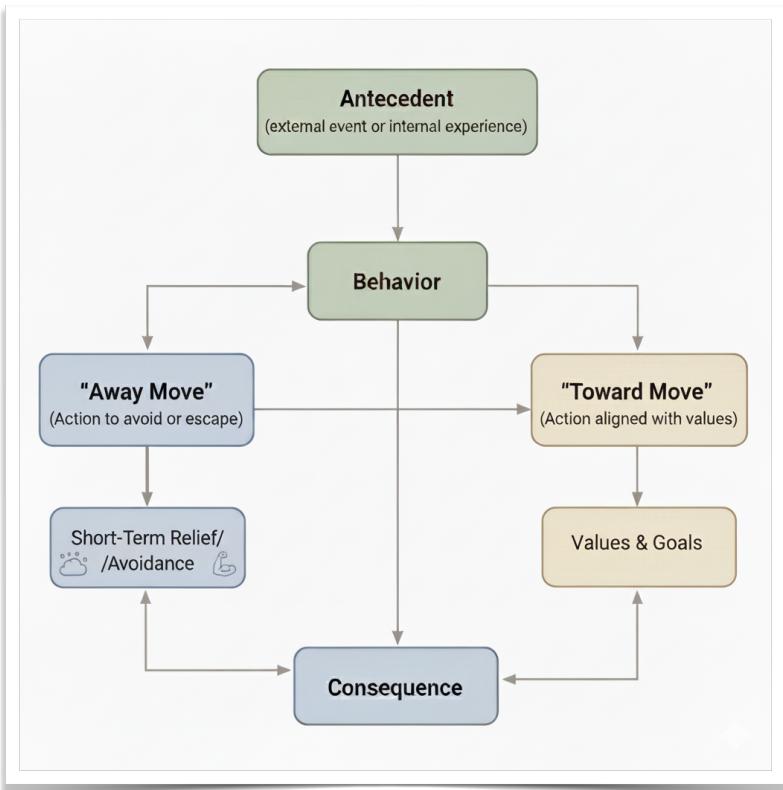
Use a cue such as: “Even though my mind says I can’t, I can still take one step.”

5. Reinforce the Toward move naturally.

- Provide immediate, authentic reinforcement such as praise, progress recognition, or peer support.

Key Insight

By integrating ABC with the ACT Matrix, we move from controlling behavior to teaching students how to live with their thoughts and feelings while still acting on what matters. Away moves often solve the short-term problem of discomfort; toward moves build long-term resilience and growth.



5. FUNCTIONS TO PLANS

Once the function of behavior is identified, the intervention plan should focus on programming competing toward moves. If a student's away move is socially reinforced (e.g., getting laughs from peers or escaping a tough task), the plan is to create toward alternatives that allow the student to still access reinforcement while staying aligned with values. For example, instead of joking to gain attention, a student might learn to share an idea or help a peer, which also earns attention but supports values like friendship and learning.

Another crucial piece is embedding defusion and acceptance cues. When UI inevitably show up—anxious thoughts, frustration, or feelings of inadequacy—students need quick, practical tools to respond. A simple phrase like “Name it; choose it” helps them notice the thought or feeling without judgment, then choose a small move anyway. Staff can model this by prompting, “Looks like that nervous thought showed up—what’s one small action you can take toward your goal right now?”

By combining function-based planning with values-based coaching, the ACT Matrix strengthens the ABC framework. The result is a plan that not only decreases unhelpful behavior but also builds psychological flexibility—the capacity to stay present, accept experiences, and act in line with what matters. This dual focus makes interventions more sustainable and meaningful for students.



CONCLUSION

The ACT Matrix is more than just a behavior tool—it is a framework for helping students discover who they want to be and how to act in ways that reflect those values, even when life gets hard. By connecting values, internal experiences, and actions, educators can shift the focus from simple compliance to genuine growth. When students learn to recognize unhelpful thoughts and feelings without being controlled by them, they gain the ability to choose Toward Moves that align with what matters most. This shift builds psychological flexibility, resilience, and authentic engagement in learning. My hope is that this guide gives you the clarity and confidence to bring the ACT Matrix into your practice—whether in individual sessions, small groups, or classrooms—and to witness the same transformation I've seen: students choosing courage over avoidance, connection over withdrawal, and growth over fear.

FINAL TAKEAWAY

The ACT Matrix helps students see that even when tough thoughts and feelings show up, they still have the power to act in line with their values. When schools focus on values-driven choices instead of compliance, students grow in resilience, flexibility, and authentic engagement. Start small, stay consistent, and you'll see meaningful change unfold.

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The ACT Matrix is a simple, visual tool that helps students notice their thoughts and feelings, clarify what they care about, and make choices that move them toward their values. In *Implement the ACT Matrix in Schools*, behavior analyst Rob Spain shows how this evidence-based framework can transform classrooms—from reducing avoidance and disruption to building resilience, engagement, and authentic learning.

About the Author

Rob Spain, M.S., BCBA, IBA, is the founder of BehaviorSchool.com. With years of experience supporting students, families, and educators, he specializes in applying Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) to real-world school settings. His mission is to make behavioral science practical, accessible, and effective for every educator.