



# JONAH: A Positive Behavior Strategy

By Dr. Kathleen VanTol

## Introduction to the JONAH Strategy

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*Pope Francis once shared a story that he attributed to Saint Francis de Sales. In it, he paints a gentle picture of compassion and guidance. Imagine, he says, that you're walking with a little donkey and it stumbles, falling onto the cobblestones. What should you do? You wouldn't scold or beat it; it's already been hurt enough. Instead, you would gently take the halter, help it back up, and say something like, "Come on, let's keep going. We'll get back on the road together and try to be more careful next time." The message is simple but profound. When someone stumbles, we should respond not with punishment but with patience, kindness, and a hand to guide them back to the road.*

*(Pope Francis et al., 2016, pp. 13-14)*

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## JONAH: A Positive Behavior Strategy

The beloved Bible story Jonah and the Whale is a dramatic tale of a runaway prophet and a giant fish. This story is also a powerful narrative about compassion, second chances and doing what is right. Jonah's journey offers valuable lessons for how we should treat others as well as how we should respond to challenging behavior. God wants us to hold people accountable while also being kind, forgiving, and fair. As Jonah's story demonstrates, every

person, no matter how far off track they get, is worthy of guidance, grace, and the opportunity for growth. Everyone can change, even people who have made a lot of mistakes.

From the start, God clearly communicates the behavior expectations to Jonah, “Go to Nineveh and tell the people to change their ways.” When Jonah disregards those expectations and makes choices that take him in the opposite direction, God doesn’t give up on Jonah. Instead, God treats him with grace and provides him with opportunities to return to the right path. God also responds with patience, giving Jonah time and space to reflect. At the end of the story, God calls Jonah to extend that same grace to the people of Ninevah, because they too have worth in God’s eyes.

The model that God provides for us in the Jonah story can help us to shift our own mindset around challenging behavior. It moves us away from punishment and toward a method of positive behavior support that still includes expectations and accountability. Rather than seeking to simply control the behavior of others, we can try to understand people and the complex circumstances that surround their behavior. We can try to view challenging behavior in a way that invites us to respond with compassion, to modify the environment to support behavior change, and to believe in the ability of everyone to learn new actions and better responses. As Galatians 6:1 reminds us, when someone is making bad decisions, we are called to “restore that person gently” to the right path (*New International Version*). The JONAH Strategy is a framework for gently restoring the person to the right path.

The **JONAH Strategy** takes its name and inspiration from Jonah’s journey and is built around three powerful ideas: **Just Opportunities, New Actions, and Hope**.


- **Just Opportunities** means doing the right thing. For educators, that means explicitly teaching rules, expectations, and procedures. It means modeling and affirming positive behavior. It means providing consistent support. Just Opportunities include second chances and accountability with compassion. Just Opportunities recognizes that student behavior often reflects unmet needs or

missing skills. When students struggle, just educators don't withhold opportunities. Instead, they identify and provide just what their students need to learn and grow.

- **New Actions** are at the heart of change. Like Jonah, students often need help turning their actions around. These New Actions are learned through coaching, practice, and reinforcement. When educators guide students toward better ways to meet their needs, unhelpful behaviors are replaced with more constructive ones. New Actions take root when educators intentionally equip students with specific tools and strategies. Then, educators work to nurture and grow these skills in their students through encouragement and support.
- And finally, **Hope**. The Jonah story ends with the possibility of change. Educators affirm that same hope when they believe that every student is capable of learning and growing. This type of hope, known as Biblical Hope, goes beyond simple optimism. Optimism is confidence in success that looks only to the future. In contrast, Biblical Hope recognizes the hard things from the past while still trusting in God's promise to redeem and restore (Romans 8:28). This type of hope responds to challenges with patience, sees potential in every situation, and never gives up on a child, even when the journey is messy.

The JONAH Strategy isn't just a behavior strategy, it's a mindset. Responses to challenging behavior are reframed from punishment to understanding and teachable moments. Just as God stayed with Jonah through the storm, the sea, and the struggle, JONAH educators walk with students. They offer **Just Opportunities**, guide students toward **New Actions**, and hold onto **Hope** every step of the way.

## The JONAH Strategy in Action: Practical Examples

Look for the fish icon  throughout the modules. It marks practical examples, classroom strategies, and sample documents.

### Example 1: Disruptive Behavior During Group Work

Behavior: A student keeps interrupting their peers and refuses to stay on task during small group activities.

JONAH Strategy Response:

- **Just Opportunity.** Re-teach expectations for group work, and offer a visual checklist or role (e.g., timekeeper) so the student has structure.
- **New Action.** Coach the student on how to use a signal (e.g., a card or hand gesture) to indicate when they need help and teach the student to use self-monitoring skills.
- **Hope.** Encourage effort and progress (“I noticed you kept your group on track and contributed two nice summaries to your group project. That’s a great step forward!”).

### Example 2: Withdrawal or Refusal to Participate

Behavior: A student frequently puts their head down and avoids classwork.

JONAH Strategy Response:

- **Just Opportunity.** Offer a choice between two tasks or the opportunity to work with a partner while also exploring whether the student has a skill deficit affecting their ability to successfully participate in the classwork.
- **New Action.** Teach a quiet signal the student can use when they need a break or feel overwhelmed and provide interventions to address identified skill gaps.
- **Hope.** Celebrate small wins: “You got started today without waiting for a prompt. That shows you're building independence!”

### Example 3: Frequent Outbursts or Defiance

Behavior: A student yells or argues when redirected.

JONAH Strategy Response:

- **Just Opportunity.** Check for unmet needs (hunger, frustration, misunderstanding) and revisit routines that may be unclear. Start with an easy task and build behavioral momentum.
- **New Action.** Practice calm-down strategies (e.g., breathing, counting, using a quiet corner) as part of their daily routine.
- **Hope.** Remind the student that a tough moment doesn't define them: “You had a hard morning, but I’m proud of how you used your strategies and came back and finished strong.”

## Outline of Module Content

There are eight modules in this series. The first three modules will focus on the **Just Opportunities** portion of the strategy. In a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) or Response to Intervention (RTI) framework, these modules align with Tier One. Modules four and five are related to the **New Actions** step of the strategy and correspond with Tier Two of the MTSS/RTI framework. The **Hope** or Tier Three portion of the strategy is covered in modules six and seven, with module eight serving as a wrap up.

- **Module 1** covers beginning of the year topics, such as establishing a positive learning atmosphere and teaching expectations, procedures, and routines.
- **Module 2** reviews lesson design and important components of engaging instruction. Classrooms with engaging instruction have fewer difficulties with challenging behavior.
- **Module 3** covers co-teaching and working with paraprofessionals.
- **Module 4** considers the topics of emotional regulation and motivation. How might trauma and unmet needs impact student behavior?
- **Module 5** surveys effective Tier Two strategies, especially focusing on environmental support ideas and other proactive behavior strategies.
- **Module 6** explores strategies that help us to look for the “why” behind the behavior.

- **Module 7** provides instruction in writing and implementing basic behavior plans.
- **Module 8** wraps up the topics and ties everything together.

## Jonah and the Big Fish



The story of Jonah and the Whale is the inspiration behind the JONAH strategy.

Image: Podrez, A. (2021). *Whale cutout on a blue surface*. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

A long time ago, there was a man named Jonah. God had a special job for Jonah. He said, “Jonah, go to the city of Nineveh. The people there are making bad choices and hurting each other. I want you to tell them to stop and to change their ways.”

But Jonah didn’t want to go. He didn’t like the people of Nineveh. He didn’t think they deserved a second chance. So instead of listening to God, Jonah ran away. Rather than go to Nineveh, he got on a boat going in the opposite direction!

While Jonah was on the boat, a big storm came. The wind howled and the waves crashed. Everyone was scared. Jonah realized the storm was happening because he had disobeyed God, so Jonah told the sailors, “This is my fault. Throw me into the sea, and the storm will stop.”

The sailors didn’t want to, but finally they did and right away, the storm stopped. The sailors were saved, but so was Jonah. He didn’t drown. Instead, God sent a huge fish to swallow him!

Jonah was in the belly of that fish for three days and three nights. Maybe God wanted to give him some time to think about what had happened and what he should do instead. From

inside the fish, Jonah prayed, “I’m sorry, God. I should have listened to You. I’ll do what You asked.”

God heard Jonah’s prayer and forgave him. He told the fish to spit Jonah out onto dry land. Jonah was safe.

This time, Jonah listened to God. He went to Nineveh and told the people, “God wants you to stop doing wrong and start doing what is right!”

And guess what? The people of Nineveh listened! They were sorry. They changed their ways, and God forgave them.

But Jonah wasn’t happy. He didn’t think it was fair that God forgave them. “They don’t deserve your kindness,” Jonah said to God.

So, God gently taught Jonah another lesson. He showed Jonah how much he cares for everyone, even people who make big mistakes. “I showed mercy to you,” God said, “and I showed mercy to them too. When people are sorry and change, I forgive them just like I forgave you.” In the end, Jonah learned that God’s love is even bigger than we expect, and His forgiveness is for *everyone* who turns back to Him. (*Holy Bible, New International Version*, Jonah 1-4).

## References

*New International Version*. (2011). BibleGateway.com.

<http://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible/>

Pope Francis., Torielli, A., & Stransky, O. (2016). *The name of God is mercy*. Random House.

## About the Author

Dr. Kathleen VanTol has over 35 years of experience working in the field of education. She holds a doctorate in special education from Western Michigan University and is a professor of special education at Dordt University. She is also a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and a Board Certified Advocate in Special Education.

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<https://manifold.open.umn.edu/projects/jonah>



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