



TRUST FIRST

Turn Behaviors that Challenge Us
into Opportunities to Learn

Dr. Deborah Bergeron
AND
Rhonda Conn-Parent

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DEDICATION

From Rhonda Conn-Parent:

I dedicate this book to Cyrille, Jonas, and Matisse, who have always been the source and resource for learning and growing in all ways. To my sister, Laura, who helped launch me to practice Trust First in the classroom. And to my mom and dad for living their code so I could learn to live mine.

From Dr. B.:

To Harrison, Samantha, Connor, and Annabel, for being a safe place for me to practice trust first, make mistakes, and try again. You are the light in my life. And to Mark, who always believes I can do whatever I can dream up. Sometimes, having someone who believes you can is all you need.

FOREWORD

When Deborah Bergeron asked me to write this foreword, I said yes before she finished the question. Deborah leads with head and heart—grounding big ideas in everyday practice. Paired with Rhonda Conn-Parent, an artist-educator whose rooms hum with curiosity and care, they have produced a book that lives up to its title: *Trust First: Turn Behaviors that Challenge Us into Opportunities to Learn*. The promise is bold; the pages deliver.

I’ve spent decades visiting classrooms and coaching leaders. Programs change, acronyms rotate, binders collect dust. The schools that move children forward—one classroom or one district at a time—begin with a single non-negotiable: they start with trust. When trust shapes culture, “misbehavior” becomes *information*, and every moment of friction becomes teachable.

WHAT “TRUST FIRST” LOOKS LIKE

This book doesn’t treat trust as a poster on the wall. It gives trust a grammar and a toolkit. Each chapter introduces a Trust First skill and moves through five clear actions: Name it. Understand it. Teach it. Watch it. Reflect on it. That cadence respects busy classrooms and strengthens professional identity.

- The opening P.I.T. Stop—Pause, Inhale, Think—is a brain-based reset that returns oxygen to the system and agency to the learner (adult and child). It’s explicit, brief, repeatable—and soon as routine as sharpening a pencil.
- K.I.D.S.—Kindness, Independence, Delight, Success—is the motivational “four tires.” If one tire is flat (say, delight has vanished in a day of correction), students will find “success” in unhelpful ways. Fill the tires and the vehicle can handle the bumps.
- Subsequent chapters translate trust into technique: solution-focused responses (power struggles become problem solving), embracing mistakes (error as data), two words that change your life (language that confers agency), the We C.A.N. Method (Cultivate Patience, Appreciate Engagement, Nurture Risk), Name That Need, Teach the Behavior You Want to See, and Launching Your Trust First Classroom.

Helpful features abound: short videos, thought bubbles for quick cues, reflection prompts, plus two sections that reveal the authors' systems thinking: Level Up (adapts moves from early childhood to secondary) and Notes for Leadership (what principals and coaches can do tomorrow). Craft meets culture.

STANDING ON STRONG SHOULDERS

Key influences are unmistakable here.

Deborah Bergeron herself—formed at Texas State with “children at the center,” refined at George Mason University in motivation and leadership, seasoned at every level of practice and policy. Her north star has long been trust; this is her field guide.

THE SCIENCE—AND THE SMILE

Trust First is warm, not “soft.” P.I.T. Stops rest on the neuroscience of stress regulation. Kindness and belonging link to attention and working memory. Agency is taught as a *skill*, not admired as a *trait*. You’ll hear echoes of learning science and the research connecting trust, oxytocin, and performance. Yet, the prose stays classroom-real—written by educators who tried a move on Tuesday and refined it by Friday.

Their book remembers something school improvement often forgets: learning should be joyful. Rhonda’s art-room wisdom and Deborah’s elementary roots keep delight in the frame—not as garnish, but as fuel. *Fun* here means purposeful engagement: the hum of shared focus, the risk taken out loud, the grin when a student says, “Wait—I get it.”

For teachers, leaders, and families:

- Teachers will find scripts to use tomorrow, routines to sustain, and reflection that strengthens identity. They’ll also find permission to pause, to model humanity, to teach behavior as explicitly as phonics or fractions.
- Leaders will value the Notes for Leadership: Model P.I.T. Stops yourself; resource the simple tools (a brain poster goes a long way); open meetings with authentic mindful breathing; create common language without rigid mandates. Trust grows when leaders align what they say, signal, and support.

- Families will recognize the portability: P.I.T. Stops at the kitchen counter; K.I.D.S. in the car; “teach the replacement behavior” at bedtime. Classroom culture and family culture are cousins.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

Post-COVID, we asked students and educators to rebuild executive function, relearn group norms, and re-establish stamina—often with elevated stress. Many systems reached for control: tighter rules, quicker consequences. Predictably, the squeeze weakened the very capacities we needed—attention, empathy, flexibility, joy.

Trust First offers a different path. Begin with relationships. Design routines that regulate. Teach the behaviors you want. Keep the work light enough to carry. This approach does not deny challenge; it turns challenge into curriculum.

A SMALL INVITATION

Before you turn to the introduction, choose one Trust First move and live with it for a while.

- One-minute P.I.T. Stop at the start of every period.
- Intentionally “fill” one K.I.D.S. tire each day.
- Replace one reprimand with one replacement behavior you will teach and rehearse.

Then journal what you notice—about students and about yourself. The book’s cadence—Name, Understand, Teach, Watch, Reflect—is a professional way of being.

To Deborah and Rhonda: Thank you for a book as usable as it is wise, as scientific as it is humane. To every reader: May these pages give you strategy and solace. Our work is complex; our purpose is clear. Start with trust. Teach with joy. Laugh often. Then watch what your learners—young and grown—do next.

Mort Sherman
Retired (Repurposed) Superintendent of Schools
and AASA Senior Associate Executive Director

PREFACE

Welcome to the wonderful world of Trust First. Decades ago, we had the good fortune of wandering into a professional development workshop that, unbeknownst to us, would forever change the way we would look at teaching children, raising children, and being adults. Before diving into the Trust First concepts and skills, it is important that we share our pathways to this point. We both have had incredible experiences that have shaped the content provided here. Some of those are research based. Some are anecdotal and personal experiences. All of these experiences have resulted in two people who have maintained their joy for this work in a climate that is often riddled with stress. We owe a debt of gratitude to all of those who have shared their knowledge with us along the way. Those experiences include our own formal education pathways.

Dr. Bergeron's (or Dr. B, as she is known in the world of education) early education training was at Texas State University (at the time, Southwest Texas State University), which began as a normal school for teachers. Texas State gave her a foundation that focused on keeping children at the center of the work. Her graduate work, a master's degree and a PhD from George Mason University, provided an in-depth study of motivation and leadership that helped to shape a servant-focused approach to leading—one that requires trust before all else. The many valuable professional development opportunities provided by the six school systems where she worked brought nuggets of valuable insights to her work. In her formal education, professional development, or her own reading, Dr. B's north star for more than thirty years has been trust. This book is a culmination of the years spent working with children and staff and keeping trust first.

Rhonda Conn-Parent credits her contribution to this book first to the University of North Texas, where she studied art education and prepared for a long career working directly with children and inspiring their art voices. She went on to participate in many professional development experiences, adapting her practices as the classroom climate shifted but always keeping trust at the center. Post-COVID-19 experiences in classrooms have proven to be extremely challenging, but an unwavering commitment to her students and a trust-centered relationship with them has given her the fortitude to adapt,

prevail, and continue to find joy in her work. For seventeen years, she owned Studio 101, a fine-arts school for children ages three to eighteen. She developed all curricula and business based on her training and pure relationship with trust- and solution-based practice. Her experience with many forms of teaching pedagogy (Montessori, Waldorf, High Trust, and more) has made her the teacher she is today. She continues to grow daily.

We have used what we've learned as classroom teachers, school administrators, and leaders of large national offices. The environment doesn't really matter. As long as there are humans involved, the Trust First approach works. We both have had student teachers and curious faculty participate when they see our classrooms in action. Over time, the urge to share our experiences beyond a conversation with curious educators was strong enough to want to put pen to paper. Plus, a written format gives us and you a concrete reference. We needed to have a concrete reference to continue the support we were providing through verbiage, scenarios, and skills.

The following pages hold golden nuggets that can change the way you teach, change the way you parent, change the way you think, and change the way you engage with yourself and the world. One of the most important takeaways for us is the *beautiful* fact that teaching is challenging and brings to the surface imperfections in all of us. It is an inevitable reflection of the reality of just being human, which is hard. Trust First not only embraces this mindset about our profession but *celebrates* it. Trust First offers skills, strategies, and shifts in perceptions that inject a healthy acceptance, camaraderie, and know-how. We hope you find Trust First as powerful, uplifting, and applicable in the learning space you are creating.

Dr. B. and Rhonda Conn-Parent

INTRODUCTION

Who do you trust?

When you read that question, who was the first person to come to your mind? Consider who that is, and then answer this question: Why? Why do you trust? What are the circumstances that allow you to trust this person? According to research scientist Paul J. Zak (2017), trust creates joy. Maybe that has something to do with how trust is created between two people. At the very least, if trust creates joy, shouldn't we be striving for that in our classrooms?

We can assume the person you trust has some basic characteristics. In brief, they are honest. They say what they mean and mean what they say. They make a promise or a commitment, and they follow through on that promise or commitment. Next, you share a respect for each other. That might be displayed through communication or by granting freedom or space to be who you are.

Now, take this a step further. Because you trust this person, what does that mean? How does that trust affect your decision-making related to this person? If your experience aligns with our own, which also aligns with research, we can assume a few things about your responses here. You are likely willing to be vulnerable with this person (showing both wins and failures). In their research, Julia Minson and colleagues (Hagmann, Minson, and Tinsley, 2024; Minson, 2025) found that personal connections are vital when people are trying to be persuasive. In her book *Dare To Lead*, author and researcher Dr. Brené Brown (2018) asserts vulnerability as a key component of building trust. This then means you can take risks to learn, move forward, fall down, and ask for support to keep going. Bottom line: When people trust, the work together becomes rich and deep, getting us closer to the desired outcome. Translate this to any human relationship, and you'll find it to be true.

For the purposes of this book, we are going to connect trust directly to classroom or behavior management. We prefer calling this Trust First classroom culture. Most folks wouldn't understand that phrase, so "classroom management" will do for now! Use a search engine to look up "classroom management." You can get a list of tools teachers can use to manage student behavior.

This book can certainly support your efforts to manage student behavior—but not exclusively. It can push you to do even more than that. In fact, it can encourage you to let go of the notion that your goal as a teacher is to manage student behavior. Instead, Trust First can teach you specific skills that are intended to shift *your* perspective first, so your responses to behaviors launch from trust—*first*. You can begin to embrace yourself as the most influential person in the room to command the culture of the classroom where joy fuels learning, mistake-making, and growing forward.

Whew! That is a heavy promise. Based on our own experience in classrooms, as well as our experience in managing and training many other teachers using this method, we feel confident that if you practice Trust First skills, practicing them one at a time and reflecting on them throughout the process, you can continue to grow. Whether you are a teacher, building administrator, or superintendent, the work we do together not only can increase your ability to be effective in that work but can also impact you as a human. It can increase your ability to embrace challenge in such a way that it actually becomes joyful to do so. You can lean into the reality that challenge *is* the work—and it is inevitable. It's just life. Whether the challenge is a child who refuses to do classwork, a parent who seems uncooperative, or a staff member who appears combative, these are all just opportunities for you to grow as a person and a professional. And the skills we will cover in this book can give you the agility to move through those moments and see each opportunity with equal value to get to the desired outcome. There is no endpoint here. It is a process, and within that process, you have the exciting opportunity to continue your own professional journey, just like we do every day.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is written in a fairly organic way. You should be able to navigate it successfully without too much trouble. Each chapter focuses on a Trust First skill. The names of these skills will make a lot more sense as you go through the book:

- P.I.T. (Pause, Inhale, Think) Stop
- K.I.D.S. (Kindness, Independence, Delight, Success)
- Solution-Driven Responses

- Embrace Mistakes—It’s All Learning!
- You *Can* or You *May*
- We C.A.N. (Cultivate Patience, Appreciate Engagement, Nurture Risk) Method of Whole-Group Instruction
- I Need. I Want. I Would Like.
- Teach—Always

Each chapter will address the featured skill using five actions:

- **Name it!** This is literally simply naming the skill. Being able to name and identify each skill is important in being able to use and implement it with your students.
- **Understand it!** Here the skill is defined and explained. Knowing how to define or explain the skill will help you to digest the concept internally and to be able to bring this skill into your daily work.
- **Teach it!** This section of the book is all about how to teach the skill. Sometimes, we are going to offer how to teach it directly to your students. Sometimes, it might be how to teach it to yourself and simply model it for your students. Sometimes, it might be both! Here we give you a step-by-step action guide. These skills work if you follow the steps, but they might need adaptation. We trust you to make those decisions.
- **Watch it!** In this section you will find a QR code that will link you to a video that more explicitly describes the skill and how you can implement it in your classroom.
- **Reflect on it!** We provide a reflection question and prompt. We suggest you start keeping a daily journal, at least while you are reading this book. Journaling each day as you try to use a new skill is vital to ensuring you allow yourself the space to change and grow.

Reflection is absolutely key to any learning process. Journaling throughout your reading will enhance the overall success you experience. We know all learners are different, so we are encouraging you to define what journaling means to you. Are you a writer? an artist? a musician? You decide how best to reflect. Find your voice and make sure you find time to reflect. Once you are finished,

you'll have your own log for reference in the future and can more easily share this process with other staff. As staff see your classroom running smoothly, they may ask you what you are doing. Most will want to learn. Some will be offended and not interested. Either is okay. You are working to improve your own practice. If you can share it with others, that is fantastic. If not, it's okay.

Additionally, at the end of each chapter, we have provided two bonus sections: Level Up and Notes for Leadership.

- **Level Up:** Trust First skills are universal. They are not uniquely designed for early childhood classrooms, but this book is specifically designed for teachers working in prekindergarten through third grade. The Level Up section provides practical applications to help you implement what you have learned in both upper elementary and middle school as well as secondary and high school classrooms. Your school system can benefit from making Trust First part of its overarching culture. So, feel free to share this book with your peers who teach older children—they will feel right at home!
- **Notes for Leadership:** We know that things are much easier when our leadership supports our work. Trust First skills are actually standalone skills. In other words, they are designed to work independently of, and in coordination with, another classroom management system that might be at work in your school building. Some of the concepts might collide or overlap, but you can build a Trust First classroom and be the only one in your building operating that way. That being said, this process works much better when embraced by the entire staff and is supported by leadership. Notes for Leadership gives principals, assistant principals, department chairs, and other building leadership guidance on how they can work to support teachers and other staff as they work to implement the Trust First skills they are learning through this book.
- **Thought Bubbles:** Throughout the book, you will find thought bubbles that are used to pull out suggestions, examples, and quick thoughts about specific parts of the book. These easy-to-read pieces will help bring focus to your reading.

You are welcome to read these sections of the book for your own perspective building and to deepen your understanding of Trust First. You might even have a leadership role in your building, and these sections will help you develop Trust First in those spaces.

Now that we've laid the groundwork, are you ready to continue your fabulous work as an educator? Education is hands down the best profession! Let's jump in and remind ourselves why that's true. Welcome to the Trust First club!



CHAPTER 1

Starting with a Reset: Pause, Inhale, and Think



NAME IT!

P.I.T. STOP: PAUSE, INHALE, AND THINK

UNDERSTAND IT!

For any NASCAR fans out there, the P.I.T. Stop is exactly what you think it is. Just like a race car in need of a break to refuel so it can continue around the track, people need to refuel, too. Human beings spend their days ebbing and flowing in and out of a variety of challenges, and sometimes those challenges can feel overwhelming. The P.I.T. Stop is designed to support that refueling anytime, anywhere.

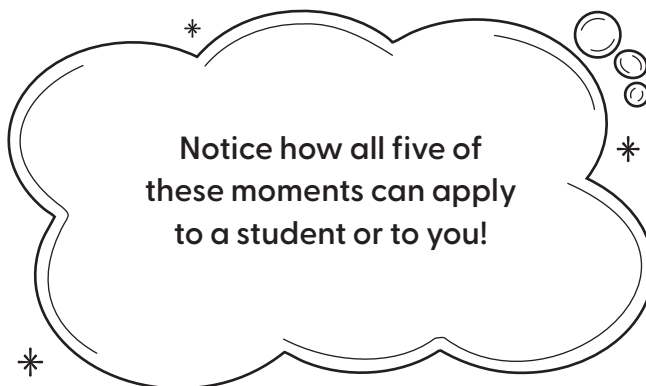
P.I.T. (Pause, Inhale, and Think) Stop is based on the brain science that tells us how oxygen and deep breathing work to calm stress and anxiety. The amygdala is where it all happens. Researchers at the Cleveland Clinic (2025) define the *amygdala* this way:

Your amygdala is a small part of your brain, but it has a big job. It's a major processing center for emotions. It also links your emotions to many other brain abilities, especially memories, learning, and your senses. When it doesn't work as it should, it can cause or contribute to disruptive feelings and symptoms.

Cleveland Clinic researchers continue by discussing how to calm this part of your brain by suggesting that breathing exercises are the first activity that can calm the brain. If we know deep, intentional breathing is a tangible way human beings can control extreme emotions, like anger or frustration, why don't we do more in our work with children to use it?

In the Trust First classroom culture, we start with this science-based approach that simplifies the process and gives you, the teacher, a practical way of implementing this into the classroom; hence, the name P.I.T. Stop. And, just like in NASCAR or Formula 1 racing, a P.I.T. Stop acts as a reset. Our P.I.T. Stop is a reset for the human brain and body, giving us the ability to get back on the track and "step on the gas." Without it, we crash or spin out, losing control and never making it to the finish line. Moments that may call for a P.I.T. Stop:

1. You are getting angry.
2. You are about to yell or insult.
3. You are feeling helpless in a situation.
4. You can't access a productive discipline strategy or skill.
5. You feel like you're spinning your wheels, trying so hard but getting nowhere.



The beauty of the P.I.T. Stop is that it is simple, clear, and feasible to implement into the regular classroom rhythm. The P.I.T. Stop is based on working mindfulness into your classroom in an organic way. According to an article shared by the American Psychological Association (Davis and Hayes, 2012), research has linked mindfulness to a reduction in stress and emotional reactivity and an increase in focus, cognitive flexibility, and working memory. These are all things that benefit students and the classroom environment. Over time, P.I.T. Stops will become as natural in your classroom as sharpening a pencil.

TEACH IT!

Begin teaching your students how to take a P.I.T. Stop by relating it to a NASCAR pit stop.

- Show them a photo or short video of a NASCAR pit stop, and ask them why they think race cars have to take pit stops. They will understand this at some level. Help your students make the connection between how a race car needs a break to finish the race and how people need breaks to get through tough parts of their days, too.
- Introduce the *reptilian complex** to your students. The reptilian complex was once thought to be a part of the brain and to control instincts such as aggression and territorial behavior (MacLean, 1990). Yes, you can use this term! It's a big one, but children love reptiles. They will be intrigued at the very least and can make great connections at the very most. Allow them to connect with the most powerful tool they possess: their brains. Only *they* can control it. You can't. Their parents can't. They can control their own brains. Give them time to think about this.

After the children have had time to process this information, introduce the different steps in a P.I.T. Stop.

*While current brain research discounts the theory behind it, this term makes a great metaphor that children can understand.

CREATE A CLASSROOM WHERE TRUST LEADS THE WAY

Rediscover the joy of teaching through the power of trust.

- ♥ Build strong, respectful relationships with every child
- ♥ Foster a culture of belonging that supports emotional and behavioral growth
- ♥ Use trust-based strategies to reduce challenging behaviors
- ♥ Encourage risk-taking, curiosity, and open communication
- ♥ Create a classroom climate where both teachers and children thrive

Trust First is your essential roadmap to cultivating a learning environment grounded in respect and connection—where meaningful relationships fuel engagement, growth, and learning.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



DEBORAH BERGERON, PHD, is the deputy director for Community Engagement Innovation at the National Head Start Association and the former director of the Office of Early Childhood Development, Office of Head Start. With a doctorate in education policy and educational psychology, Dr. Bergeron is a national leader in early education and child development.



RHONDA CONN-PARENT is an experienced elementary art specialist, as well as a trained facilitator in trust-based classroom strategies drawing on the methods of Dennis McLaughlin's Trust Psychology approach.

“

To say that I love *Trust First* would be putting it mildly. I love it because it is a synthesis of the research on managing challenging behavior without being academic; it moves beyond some of the less effective practices by providing positive alternatives for children, birth through high school; it is based on the best principles of adult learning and as such is catchy and memorable; and all of the suggestions are doable, doable and more doable! I will be giving this book to everyone I know from now on.”

—ELLEN GALINSKY

President, Families and Work Institute,
Author, *Mind in the Making*
and *The Breakthrough Years*


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