One-on-one support that builds agency

Ten things tutors and coaches can do without taking over the student's work.

10 PRACTICAL MOVES

1 Ask what they want

Ask which task or obstacle matters to the student today. Tutoring focuses on course content; coaching focuses on learning systems. Let the student choose.

2 Make roles clear

Say what you can help with, what you cannot do, what you record, and who can see those notes. Privacy surprises damage trust.

3 Start with the obstacle

Ask where the process breaks down. Understanding, remembering, starting, choosing, and navigating campus procedures call for different kinds of support.

4 Model, then step back

Demonstrate one step, offer the smallest useful hint, and let the student attempt the next. Check when the prompt can disappear.

5 Offer real choices

Ask whether the student prefers talking, writing, examples, or trying it directly. Check whether your favorite strategy actually helps them.

6 Plan for use outside sessions

Choose one manageable strategy the student can use without you. At the next session, ask whether they used it and what got in the way.

7 Let manageable mistakes teach

Explain foreseeable consequences without taking over every decision. Help students practice spotting, repairing, and learning from errors.

8 Teach communication as options

Explain what a convention means and offer choices for using it. Don't turn eye contact, tone, or personality into the objective.

9 Respect "no" and overload

Treat a refusal, pause, or request to change tasks as meaningful information. Maintain actual safety boundaries without treating dissent as defiance.

10 Measure more than compliance

Did the student understand, decide, self-advocate, or use the strategy between appointments? Attendance and quiet cooperation are weak substitutes.

THE ONE-QUESTION CHECK: "After this session, what will the student be able to do, decide, or try that they could not do before?"

A correct answer produced with endless prompting is not the same thing as a skill the student owns.

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Help, not compliance

Use specific examples, and check whose goals are being served.

PUT IT INTO WORDS

LESS HELPFUL

“If you sit still and look at me, you earn your break. We’re doing my planner system today.”

TRY THIS

“Would a break help? Want to try a planner, a checklist, or something else? We can see what works.”

FIVE-MINUTE SESSION TEMPLATE

1. Ask what the student wants from today.
2. Name the exact problem or sticking point.
3. Model only as much as necessary; invite a real choice.
4. Have the student try or explain the next step.
5. Agree on a student-chosen action and how to check it later.

ABA, AUTONOMY, AND THE PURPOSE OF SUPPORT

Critiques of Applied Behavior Analysis raise a question for every one-on-one educator: are we teaching something the student wants or needs, or simply making their behavior more acceptable to us? Some autistic adults describe benefit from ABA; others report coercion, masking, or harm. These reports are important, but they do not establish that every program is the same or that college coaching is ABA therapy.

THREE QUESTIONS BEFORE YOU REWARD OR CORRECT A BEHAVIOR

Whose goal is it? Can the student refuse or renegotiate? Does success increase autonomy, access, safety, or something the student values rather than just outward conformity?

WHAT THE RESEARCH DOES AND DOES NOT SAY

Postsecondary mentoring reviews find promising outcomes, but studies differ and are often small. A 2025 Dutch mixed-methods study documented both positive and negative experiences of ABA-derived services; it was not a representative study of college tutors. Practice articles increasingly call for assent and neurodiversity-affirming goals, but a published recommendation is not proof of widespread adoption.

Read more: Duerksen et al. (2021), doi:10.1089/aut.2020.0054 · Jonkman et al. (2025), doi:10.1007/s10803-025-06958-x · Mathur et al. (2024), doi:10.1007/s40617-024-00907-3

Full guide: ttwnest.org/for/tutors/ · Research discussion: ttwnest.org/research/questions/support-or-compliance/

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