TRIP Guide
Turning Research Into Practice

TRIP 4: DE-ESCALATING PROBLEM BEHAVIOR

Students with chronic or severe behavior problems often follow a predictable pattern of behavior escalation leading to outbursts. Teachers may wonder what they can do to help calm an agitated student before they become explosive. Understanding how behavior problems escalate and when and how to intervene is a key factor in effective classroom management. This TRIP report summarizes the book “Managing the Cycle of Acting-Out Behavior in the Classroom” (Colvin, 2004) and provides an overview of the acting-out cycle and suggestions for interventions at each phase.

PHASE 1: Calm
During this first phase, the student is following classroom expectations and able to engage in the lesson appropriately. A student with problem behaviors may spend some or most of their day in this stage, until an event or interaction triggers more agitated behavior.

Useful Strategies for Phase 1
1. Plan the classroom environment to allow supervision, reduce distractions, and provide a quiet space for students to calm down.
2. Establish and teach clear expectations and acknowledge and praise compliance.
3. Establish classroom routines to decrease downtime and disruptions.
4. Plan ahead for transitions and entry and exit routines.

PHASE 2: Triggers
A trigger is any event or interaction that starts the student moving toward acting-out behavior. These events cause increased agitation in a student who has previously been calm. The triggers may be school-based, such as conflicts with peers or teachers, academic pressures related to poor academic skills, corrections or reprimands from teachers, or changes in routine. Non-school based triggers may include problems at home, medical issues, lack of sleep or food, use of medications or illicit drugs, or involvement in peer group activities that contribute to an unsafe school environment. Being faced with a problem that the student does not have the skills to solve is often a trigger for angry behavior.

Useful Strategies for Phase 2
1. Identify the situation where problem behavior is likely to occur.
2. Use precorrection strategies to teach the appropriate response.
   Rehearse the expectations, prompt or remind students of them as needed, and provide specific praise and reinforcement.
3. Work with other staff to teach and reinforce social skills for students who have difficulty following the expectations.
PHASE 3: Agitation
When a student moves into this phase, teachers and peers can see behaviors that indicate anger, sadness, anxiety or frustration. Behaviors that may increase during this phase include hand movements such as tapping or opening and closing books, darting eyes, wandering from one group to another, or starting a task and then dropping it to begin another. Overall, agitated students may appear preoccupied or unfocused and unable to engage fully in an activity. Teachers may notice the student daydreaming, avoiding eye contact or conversation, withdrawing, or folding their arms while disengaging from the activity. Their verbal or nonverbal message is “Leave me alone”.

Useful Strategies for Phase 3
1. Show empathy: recognize the student’s problem and communicate concern for the student’s well-being.
2. Help the student become engaged in the lesson or task at hand
3. Provide space in a quiet area, or allow students to disengage briefly or to put their heads down for some quiet time.
4. Provide encouragement, reassurance and extra time if needed.
5. Allow student to engage in a favorite activity for a brief period.
6. Use proximity or brief interactions; show acceptance of student.
7. Leave student alone to complete independent work, or provide passive activities such as listening to a story or tape or watching a short video.
8. Provide opportunities for movement such as running an errand or sorting and distributing materials.
9. Help the student to identify their feelings of agitation and choose strategies to try and self-manage their feelings.

PHASE 4: Acceleration
In this phase, behavior becomes focused and directed toward engaging others in a negative interaction. The student may begin to question, argue with or confront the teacher or defy teacher directives. The student might choose to provoke classmates or a staff member. When presented with a task, they may be deliberately off-task, try to avoid or escape tasks, or follow the direction while doing another unacceptable behavior. Students may deliberately break rules, cry or whine, threaten or use offensive language, or destroy property. This phase presents the final opportunity to de-escalate and calm an agitated student.

Useful Strategies for Phase 4
1. Avoid escalating the student’s behavior; be careful not to shout or take the behavior personally. Don’t get in the student’s face or space. Don’t corner, touch or grab the student. Arguing, defensiveness, agitation or anger on the part of the staff member may serve to escalate the situation.
2. Don’t show reactive behaviors; instead, disengage briefly, regain your composure, and return to the student. Don’t allow the student to
engage you in arguments or power struggles.
3. Pausing, rather than responding immediately, shows students that while they may be out of control, staff members are calm and controlled.
4. Use a calm but serious tone when speaking to the student. Focus on addressing the behavior while maintaining a respectful tone, and be brief and matter-of-fact. Use the student’s name and speak softly. Speak with the student privately if possible. Focus on the expected behavior.
5. Be calm when approaching the agitated student. Move slowly and give the student appropriate physical space.
6. If the situation escalates, withdraw and follow school procedures for emergency situations.

PHASE 5: Peak
This phase includes serious behaviors that may pose a safety threat to the student or others. Students may destroy or seriously damage property, attack others or hurt themselves, run away or throw a tantrum.

Useful Strategies for Phase 5
1. Focus on student and staff safety.
2. Notify necessary staff of situation and provide directions for response.
3. If needed, use evacuation of classroom or lock-down procedures.
4. Contact appropriate assistance, such as police, superintendent, etc.

PHASE 6: De-escalation
During this phase, the student begins to calm down and the behaviors decrease in intensity. Behavior may be similar to the third phase in lack of focus and distraction, and may respond well to clear, brief directions. Students may appear confused or withdraw. They might deny their behavior, blame others or blame the trigger event, or try to reconcile with the teacher. They will avoid problem solving or discussion at this point, as they need time to begin recovery. Students may respond well to calming, non-demanding tasks such as sorting things or manipulating small toys or items.

Useful Strategies for Phase 6
1. Once escalation is over, allow student space to calm down.
2. Separate the student from classmates and provide supervision during a cooling-off period.
3. Determine whether student needs to be sent home, and determine whether student is calm enough to leave building.
4. If student is remaining in school, provide independent work that will be fairly easy to complete in order to help student regain focus. Completed work should show a reasonable degree of effort; continue task until student is cooperative. Active seatwork, such as copying or coloring, is more effective at re-focusing student than passive tasks like reading.
5. Debrief student by requiring him or her to complete a form regarding the behavior that occurred. Students may require some time or assistance to respond. (See reference below for useful debriefing forms).
6. Apply consequences and allow student to return to regular activities.
7. Review the incident to note patterns of problem behavior and to make a prevention plan.
8. If needed, provide staff with accurate information about incident.
9. Document the incident to provide data for ongoing planning for safety.

PHASE 7: Recovery
This phase marks the student’s return to the calm phase. They may express a desire to do “busy work” that is easy and does not require much interaction with others. Group activities or discussions will still be difficult for the student to manage. They may appear quiet or defensive and will avoid interaction.

Useful Strategies for Phase 7
1. Help the student to return to normal activities and engage in learning.
2. Continue with planned consequence and do not discuss or negotiate.
3. Acknowledge cooperative and appropriate behaviors.
4. Encourage and support the student in changing problem behaviors.

This TRIP Report is adapted from the book Managing the Cycle of Acting-Out Behavior in the Classroom by Geoff Colvin (Behavior Associates, 2004). See the book for a more detailed description of the acting-out cycle and effective interventions, along with useful checklists and forms for student and staff use.

To order a copy of Dr. Colvin’s book contact;

EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES, LLS
PO BOX 21570
BOULDER, CO 80308

PHONE: 303-442-6789
EMAIL: ADMIN@SUCCESSFULSCHOOLS.ORG

This TRIP report was prepared by Dr. Mary Jean O’Reilly and Dr. Robert March