De-Escalation: Understanding the Acting Out Cycle

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We know far more about effective prevention strategies than we do about how to address challenging behavior once it occurs.
What the Science of Behavior Has Taught Us

• Students are not born with bad behaviors

• Aversive consequences don’t teach new behavior

• Direct teaching of replacement behaviors works

• Specific, positive feedback and opportunities to practice aid retention of new behaviors

“Educators who approach discipline as a process of establishing and maintaining effective learning environments tend to be more successful than educators who place more emphasis on their roles as authority figures or disciplinarians.” – Good & Brophy
The Acting-Out Cycle

1. Follows directions and on-task
2. Change in routine
3. Off-task, language off topic
4. Questioning and arguing/non-compliance
5. Verbal threats/aggression
6. Denial/blaming others
7. Subdued in class discussion

Colvin (2004)
Behavioral Chains

Each ensuing behavior in a given behavior chain becomes more serious than the one preceding it.
Change the Behavior Momentum

Interrupt the behavioral chain at any time to prevent the occurrence of more serious types of behavior.

Nevin, 1970
Success Predicts Success & Failure Predicts Failure . . .

Adults Must Affect Success!

Failure

Low Self-Esteem
Escape & Aggression

Success

Self-Control, Confidence & Independence

Dr. Terry Scott
University of Louisville
Behavior is Affected By:

What comes BEFORE it

Antecedent
“trigger”

What comes AFTER it

Behavior

Consequence
“response”
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Antecedents</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The alarm goes off</td>
<td>I wake up</td>
<td>I make it to work on time and I keep my job</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abby is working with a group of peers on a project and is prompted by the teacher to get to work.</td>
<td>Abby begins to recite explicit lyrics of a song.</td>
<td>Abby’s peers laugh and her teacher shouts from across the room that those lyrics are inappropriate and if she doesn’t get to work she will get a detention.</td>
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Behavior is Functional, Not **GOOD** or **BAD**

- Functional = it pays off for the student in some way... so they do it again

  - We may see the behavior as being “good” or “bad”, but the student does it because it is effective, it pays off for them
Identifying the Function of the Behavior

They want to GET something

Activities/Tangibles

Attention

Sensory

They want to GET OUT something

Function – Examine the consequences that resulted from the behavior

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Two Essential Components for Managing Severe Acting-Out Behavior

1. Understand the Model
   - Specific Behaviors for Each Phase
   - Know exactly where the student is in the cycle (placement in Model).

2. Develop strategies for each phase
   - Implement strategies based on student placement and needs

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“The best time to intervene on problem behavior is \textbf{not} occurring” (Carr et al., 2002, p.9)
The Model: Seven Phases of The Escalation or Acting-out Cycle

Whether the problem behavior is managed safely or not or is defused
In a large measure depends on YOUR INITIAL RESPONSE
-Dr. Geoff Colvin

Student’s ability to cognitively process what is happening in the environment.

Covin & Sugai, 1989; Colvin, 2004
## Escalation Cycle (adapted from Bounds, 2003)

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**Specific Staff/Adult Response**

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<th>Reduce anxiety</th>
<th>Safety</th>
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Lewis, Kittelman & Wilcox (2011).
Strategies for Responding to Each Phase of the Acting-Out Cycle
Phase One- Calm

Student is cooperative and behavior is acceptable.

- Accepts corrective feedback
- Follows directives
- Sets personal goals
- Ignores distractions
- Accepts praise
- On-task

What are other characteristics of students in the calm phase?
Strategies

1. Calm

Intervention is focused on proactive interventions. Focus on instruction and positive behavior support.

- Arrange for high rates of successful academic & social engagements
- Use positive reinforcement
- Teach social skills
- Communicate positive expectations
Phase Two- Trigger

Also called “antecedents”

- Conflicts/Failure
- Demands
- Changes in routine
- Pressure
- Ineffective problem solving
- Facing correction procedures
- Non-school based triggers

What are other triggers do you see?
Strategies

2. Trigger

Intervention is focused on prevention and redirection.

- Increase opportunities for success (e.g., precorrection)
- Respond to students exhibiting expected behavior
- Reinforce the student’s first on task response
- Intermittently reinforce on-task behavior
- Pattern of behavior? Look at formal programs/services. Address non-school based triggers.
Phase Three: Agitation

Overall behavior is unfocused and distracted often due to an inability to handle the trigger(s).

- Off-task
- Questioning/Arguing
- Out of seat and other movement
- Bothering others
- Social withdrawal

What are other characteristics of students who are agitated?
Strategies

3. Agitation

Intervention is focused on reducing anxiety.

Implement before onset of escalation

1. Avoid escalation responses (use empathy)
2. If not addressed student may escalate or remain distracted making instruction difficult
3. Provide reasonable options & choices
4. Involve in successful engagement (behavior momentum)
Defusing Off-Task Behavior

1. Assess the situation: determine “can’t do” or “won’t do” *(Is it an emergency situation? If so, follow crisis procedures. If not, follow off-task defusing steps)*

2. Maintain the flow of instruction

3. Recognize on-task students, making no response to off-task students.

4. Redirect *(focus on task, brief language/gestures, prompt student of procedures for asking for help)*.

5. Praise compliance.

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Phase Four- Acceleration

Overall behavior is staff-engaging- leading to further negative interactions.

- Questioning/Arguing/Threats
- Noncompliance and defiance
- Provocation of others
- Rule violations

What are other characteristics of accelerated behavior?
Strategies

4. Acceleration

Intervention is focused on safety.

- Remove all triggering factors
- Avoid escalating prompts
- Maintain calmness, respect and detachment
- Approach the student in a nonthreatening manner
- Utilize non-confrontational limit-setting procedures
Techniques that BACKFIRE

- Holding a grudge
- Raising your voice - yelling
- Nagging
- Drawing unrelated persons into the conflict
- Preaching
- Using sarcasm
- Making assumptions
- Bringing up unrelated events

What are other responses you have used or seen used that have or have the potential to backfire?

- Insisting you are right
- Insisting on having the last word
Phase Five - Peak

Overall behavior is out of control creating safety concerns.

- Physical aggression
- Severe tantrums
- Property destruction
- Self-injury
- Running, screaming

Others?

Schmitz, 2014
Strategies

5. Peak

Intervention is focused on **safety** only!

- Focus is on crisis management
- Behavioral Emergency – [Room Clear example](#)
- Safe strategies- Emergency Safety Intervention if there is immediate danger. (if ESI used, document & notify)
- Learn from it…(FBA, BIP, Mental Health Assessment, etc)
Responses to AVOID

- Agitated behavior from staff (shouting)
- Cornering the student
- Engaging in power struggles
- Moving into the student’s space
- Touching or grabbing the student
- Sudden or very quick responses
- Making derogatory statements about the student
- Arguing/becoming defensive
- Body language that communicates anger or frustration
- Do not communicate “urgency to gain control”
What can I do instead?

Speak calmly
Speak privately
Minimize body language
Keep a reasonable distance; Move slowly and deliberately toward the problem situation
Speak respectfully and privately
Establish eye level position
Be brief
Stay with agenda
Avoid power struggles
Give student space
Phase Six- De-escalation

Overall behavior shows confusion and lack of focus.

- Confusion
- Withdrawal—sleep, head down
- Denial
- Blaming others
- May respond to concrete directions
- May apologize and try to make up

Others?

Schmitz, 2014
Strategies

6. De-escalation

Intervention is focused on monitoring for re-escalation of behavior

✓ Monitor for health/safety of all involved
✓ Avoid blaming- provide opportunity for non-judgmental discussion
✓ Allow cool-down time and space
✓ Engage in independent work- provide easy/concrete tasks
Debrief and Problem Solve

*after student has been calm for 20 minutes should only take 3-5 minutes*

*Conduct this activity following consequences—* separate from consequences

Use a problem solving format:

1. What did you do? (name the behavior)
2. Why did you do it? (capture student’s need)
3. What else could you have done that would
   a. Meet your need and
   b. Be acceptable
Phase Seven- Recovery

Overall behavior shows an eagerness for busy work and a reluctance to interact.

- Eagerness for independent work
- Subdued behavior
- Sleep

Schmitz, 2014
Strategies

7. Recovery

Intervention focuses on returning to normal activities.

- Follow through with consequences—but do not disrupt flow of instruction.
- Positively reinforce any displays of appropriate behavior
- Debrief/rehearse problem solving routine
- Review and revise plan as needed
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Group Activity

- Describe an event in which the student’s behavior escalates. Be sure to describe all seven phases of the acting-out cycle.
- How can you prevent acting-out behavior?
- How can you tell when a student’s behavior is escalating?
- What do you do when a student is acting out?
- How do you deal with a student who is fully escalated?
- Complete the escalation cycle worksheet for this student.
Additional Resources

- [https://ksdetasn.org/mtss/kansas-mtss-documents-resources](https://ksdetasn.org/mtss/kansas-mtss-documents-resources)
- De-Escalation Videos (links in handout)
Contact Information

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www.ksdetasn.org - Request Assistance