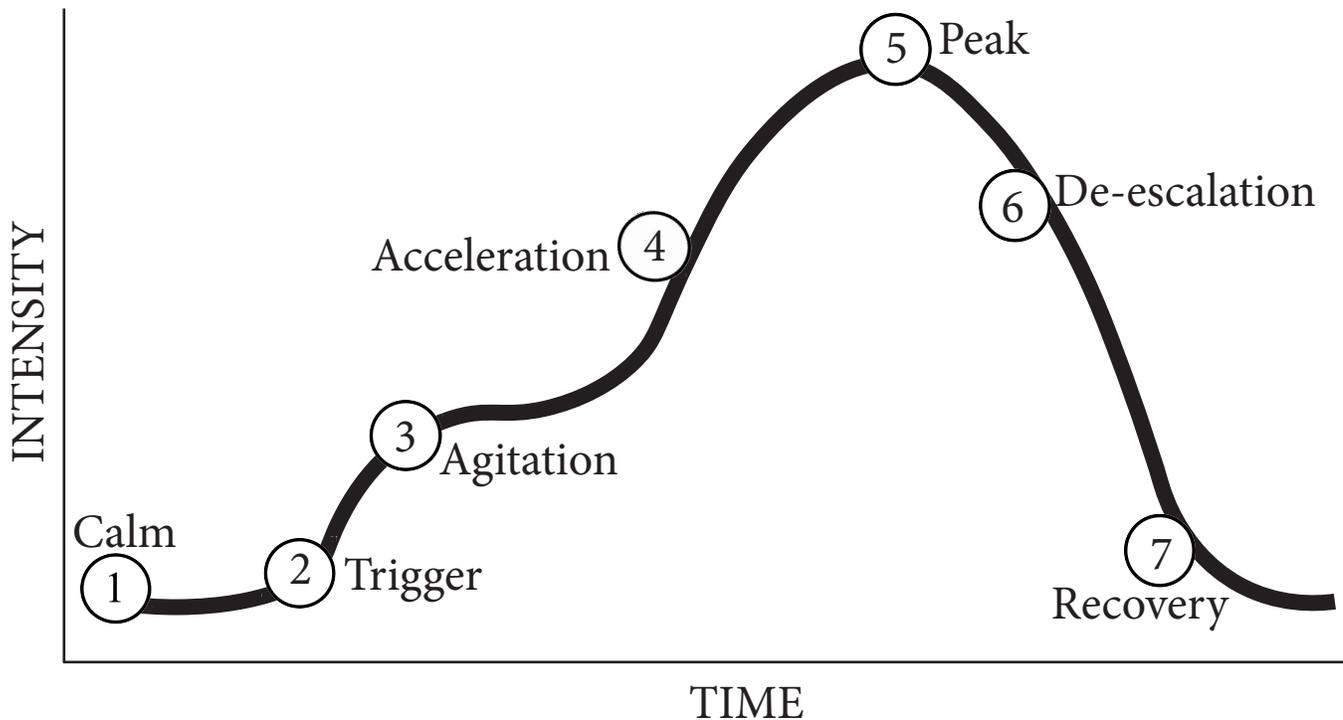


A growing concern for teachers is challenging behavior exhibited by students in the classroom. Teachers often have at least one student who shows escalating behaviors. The reason good strategies, like providing choice or consistently implementing consequences, don't work 100% of the time for these students is because they are being used regardless of the context of the situation. By developing an understanding of the de-escalation cycle, teachers can match their response to the student's behavior phase.

The de-escalation cycle is defined in seven distinctive phases. Problem behaviors that are seen in the classroom occur within this cycle. Student characteristics at each phase provide all staff predictability in planning for students. Serious problem behaviors can be prevented by intervening early in the cycle and developing appropriate strategies for responding. If teachers can prevent problem behaviors from gaining momentum, they can prevent more serious forms of acting-out behaviors from occurring.



Steps and Strategies to De-escalate a Student

Phase 1 – Calm

Student's behavior in the calm phase

- Relatively calm and cooperative
- Sets personal goals
- Accepts corrective feedback and praise
- Follows directives
- Socially appropriate
- Atypical behavior is manageable

Strategies to implement when the student is calm

- Create a positive environment
- Provide structure
- Provide consistency
- Prompt appropriate behaviors
- Reinforce appropriate behaviors
- Pre-correct when necessary
- Provide clear behavioral expectations
- Teach procedures, social skills, problem solving, and self-management

*Important tip - It is important to know each student's calm state. It is the student's baseline behavior. Be aware of any change in baseline behavior.

Phase 2 – Trigger (antecedent)

Student's environmental or emotional triggers that may escalate the behavior

- Provocation
- Interpersonal conflicts
- Aversive incidents
- Changes in routine
- Repeated failures
- Academic demands
- Unmet needs
- Low rates of positive reinforcement
- Frequent correction

Strategies to implement to avoid a behavior escalation

- Identify situations where the behavior is likely to occur
- Pre-correction, a classroom management strategy, remind students of behavior expectations before potential behavior problems occur
- Teach and reinforce appropriate responses
- Provide specific praise and reinforcement
- Speak privately to the student
- Be aware of your proximity and body language
- Be supportive and address any need
- Be empathetic and nonjudgmental
- Work with all staff to teach and reinforce appropriate responses

*Important tip - Identify and be aware of student's triggers.

Phase 3 – Agitation

Student's anxiety or fear cause specific behaviors to increase or decrease in frequency or intensity

- Darting/glaring eyes or avoiding eye contact
- Breathing and/or heartrate increases
- Movement of hands or feet
- Nervousness
- Withdrawing from the group
- Crying or refusing to talk
- Increased or decreased verbalization
- Atypical behavior for that student

Strategies to reduce agitation

- Recognize agitation (may present as increased activity or withdrawal)
- Remain calm
- Redirect student
- Prompt the desired behavior
- Communicate concern
- Allow space
- Provide support
- Provide space
- Present options
- Offer preferred activities
- Move closer in proximity
- Initiate previously taught self-regulation strategies
- Involve the student in the plan

*Important tip - Agitation will lead to acceleration if needs are not addressed. This is your last opportunity to prevent behavior acceleration.

Phase 4– Acceleration

Student's anxiety or fear accelerate behaviors to defensive, withdrawal, aggressive, or acting out behaviors

- Attempts to engage others by questioning, arguing, and refusing
- Passive noncompliance, “shutting down”
- Voice level and tone changes
- Refuses to follow directions
- Swears or engages in hurtful statements
- Challenges authority
- Makes verbal/nonverbal threats
- Physical changes such as pacing, trembling, clenching jaw/fists, becomes red in the face

Strategies for supporting escalating students

- Do not try to reason with the student, because rational thinking is gone
- Remain calm, but serious
- Avoid overreacting
- Do not engage
- Ignore challenging questions
- Show respect and care
- State expected behavior in brief, clear directives and possible negative consequences
- Allow additional response time
- Set limits/compromise
- Consider which rules are negotiable and which are not
- Allow verbal release

*Important tip - It is critical to keep the safety of everyone in mind during this phase.

Phase 5– Peak

Student has become “out of control “ and is displaying severe behavior

- Physical aggression
- Self-injurious behavior
- Property destruction
- Eloping
- Hyperventilation

Strategies to consider for severe behavior

- Follow the crisis plan
- Remove bystanders
- Clear the room or area
- Call administration
- Visually supervise while maintaining a safe distance from the student

*Important tip - Avoid any physical contact with the student and only use safe physical restraints as a last resort due to a risk of harm to self or others.

Phase 6– De-escalation

Student displays confusion, with a decrease in physical and emotional energy

- Return of rational thinking
- Social withdrawal
- Denial
- Blaming of others
- Minimization of problem
- Sleeping
- Shame

Strategies to promote recovery and prevent reoccurring incidents

- Monitor for health and safety
- Allow student time and space to calm
- Do not force interactions
- Remove excess attention
- Avoid blaming, provide opportunity for non-judgmental discussion
- Debrief and document the incident
- Provide tasks that the student can do independently

*Important tip - The student is very vulnerable at this stage and could escalate quickly if given demands.

Phase 7– Recovery

Student is back in physical and emotional control of behavior

- Subdued
- Reluctant to discuss incident
- Attempts to correct the issue
- Unwillingness to participate in group activities, preference to be alone
- May show signs of exhaustion

Strategies to promote recovery and prevent reoccurring incidents

- Debrief with staff to discuss what worked and what did not
- Establish basic facts of what happened
- Listen non-judgmentally to the student
- Investigate ways to prevent behavior from reoccurring
- Positively reinforce any displays of appropriate behavior
- Re-establish routines and relationships
- Give support and encouragement

*Important tip - Ensure the student that the incident did not damage the relationship you have with him/her. Remind the student you care unconditionally.

Adapted from: Colvin, G., & Scott, T. M. (2015). Managing the cycle of acting-out behavior in the classroom (2nd ed.). Corwin Press.

Below is a link to an IRIS module that provides an overview of the acting out cycle:

<https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/bi1/cresource/q2/p02/>



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