

# Verbal De-escalation Techniques to Use With Students

## What is Verbal De-Escalation?

- ◆ Verbal De-Escalation is a targeted intervention for use with students who are at risk for aggression. It involves using calm language, along with other communication techniques, to diffuse, re-direct, or de-escalate a conflict situation (Kerr & Nelson, 2010).

## Important Terms

- ◆ Conflict Cycle: A school of thought expounded by the Life Space Crisis Intervention group that behavior escalation is cyclical, and teacher intervention can actually be counter-productive. The cycle includes:
  - ◆ a stressful incident
  - ◆ the student's feelings or reaction
  - ◆ the student's observable behavior (or misbehavior)
  - ◆ the teacher's reaction (which can become a stressful incident.)
    - ◆ The teacher's reaction can serve to perpetuate and even escalate the conflict when the teacher uses negative criticism, reprimands, and punishment (Fecser & Long, 1998).

## Important Terms

- ◆ Behavior Escalation: The cycle or stages in which conflict and/or undesirable behavior worsens and becomes more intense, serious, and possibly dangerous (Fecser & Long, 1998; Colvin & Sugai, 1989).
- ◆ Diffusing or De-Escalating Behavior: Utilizing research-based positive behavior supports and interventions to lessen and alleviate conflict with the goal of returning to the stage of recovery or the state of calm (Duggan & Dawson, 2004).

## Seven Stages Stages of Behavior Escalation

1. **Calm** - The student is relatively calm and cooperative
1. **Trigger** - The student experiences unresolved conflicts that serve to trigger the students' behavior to escalate.
1. **Agitation**- The student is increasingly unfocused and upset
1. **Acceleration** - As the conflict remains unresolved, the student focuses on the conflict

## Seven Stages Stages of Behavior Escalation

5. **Peak** - The student is out of control and exhibits the most severe behavior
6. **De-escalation** - Having vented in the Peak stage, the student displays confusion in this phase, but the severity of the peak behavior subsides.
7. **Recovery** - The student often wishes to engage in *non-engagement* activities such as going to the nurse or counselor's office or putting their head down.

(Colvin & Sugai, 1989)



## Prevention and Understanding

- ◆ Confronting an angry, potentially aggressive student can increase or decrease the potential for problems.
- ◆ Realize that this student may have been dealing with stressful situations earlier in the day or the night before.
  - ◆ Sometimes an incident may just be the tipping point for a student, rather than the main cause.
- ◆ Listen to what the student is saying.
  - ◆ Allow the student to utilize supports if they say they need them.

## De-escalation Techniques

- ◆ Remove peer spectators or take the student to a private or semi-private setting
- ◆ Provide adequate personal space to the student
- ◆ If you don't know the student, introduce yourself and say your position at the school.
- ◆ Take a nonthreatening stance with your body at an angle to the student and your empty hands at your sides in plain sight.
  - ◆ A walkie-talkie can look weapon-like in the hand of a staff member



## De-escalation Techniques

- ◆ Maintain a calm demeanor and steady, level voice, even in the face of intense verbal disrespect or threats from the student.
- ◆ Speak softly and slowly step back and try to see the situation from the student's perspective.
- ◆ Speak respectfully to the student
  - ◆ strive to appear calm even if you are upset or anxious
  - ◆ avoid use of sarcasm, teasing, reprimands or other negative comments

## De-escalation Techniques

- ◆ Make sure the student feels heard.
  - ◆ Repeat statements the student says and ask for clarification.
  - ◆ Identify points of agreement.
    - ◆ “This happened, and I would feel that way too.”
  - ◆ Ask open-ended questions about the incident.
- ◆ Acknowledge the student's emotional condition empathetically
  - ◆ “You're really angry, and I want to understand why.”

## De-escalation Techniques

- ◆ Keep vocabulary simple and sentences brief to allow the student to process what you are saying.
  - ◆ Allow the student time to process information.
- ◆ Set limits
  - ◆ “I want you to sit down before we continue.”
  - ◆ “We can talk, but only if you stop swearing.”

## De-escalation techniques

- ◆ Reassure the student.
  - ◆ “You’re not in trouble. This is your chance to give me your side of the story.”
  - ◆ “Let’s figure out how to take care of this situation in a positive way.”
  - ◆ “I want to understand why you are upset so that I can know how to respond.”

## De-escalation Techniques

- ◆ Develop an action plan with the student.
  - ◆ Is the student ready to back to class?
  - ◆ Does the student need to speak to a counselor, social worker, or school psychologist?
- ◆ Provide problem-solving counseling with a school psychologist or counselor at the earliest opportunity.
- ◆ Debrief with other staff that should know of the incident.

## Scenarios

Scenario 1 - What did the teacher do wrong?

Scenario 2 - What did the teacher do well?



## Questions:

- ♦ What age groups is this intervention appropriate for?
  - ♦ Verbal de-escalation can (and should) be used with any age group, even adults
- ♦ What is the most important thing to remember when implementing verbal de-escalation?
  - ♦ You need to self-monitor your words, tone of voice, and body language. Do not argue or insist on getting the last word.
- ♦ How long does it take to see the results of implementing verbal de-escalation?
  - ♦ Results are immediate. As the student begins to calm down, the teacher has the opportunity to further de-escalate, offer non-judgmental listening to the student, and use non-confrontational guided questions to help the student recover.

## Questions:

- ♦ What are the long-term effects of using verbal de-escalation in the classroom?
  - ♦ Like other positive behavior supports, the effects of using verbal de-escalation have been proven to promote student growth and development and ultimately further student learning. Teachers find success when offering constructive, corrective feedback to address students' inappropriate behavior instead of criticizing or punishing.

## Discussion:

- ◆ Has anyone experienced a situation where they had to use verbal de-escalation strategies with a student?
  - ◆ How did it go?
  - ◆ What would you have done differently?

## Resources

- ◆ [http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavior\\_calm\\_agitated\\_student](http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavior_calm_agitated_student)
- ◆ <http://www.newleafacademy.com/article-parenting-an-angry-teen.asp>
- ◆ Karp, B. (2010). Verbal de-escalation in the classroom [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from: [http://www.sbbh.pitt.edu/files/Powerpoint%20Presentations%202524%20Spring%202010/Karp\\_Barbara\\_Verbal\\_DeEscalation.pdf](http://www.sbbh.pitt.edu/files/Powerpoint%20Presentations%202524%20Spring%202010/Karp_Barbara_Verbal_DeEscalation.pdf)
- ◆ Larson, J. (2008). Angry and aggressive students. *The Education Digest*, 73(7), 48-52.