



How To: Calm the Agitated Student: Tools for Effective Behavior Management

Students can sometimes have emotional outbursts in school settings. This fact will not surprise many teachers, who have had repeated experience in responding to serious classroom episodes of student agitation. Such outbursts can be attributed in part to the relatively high incidence of mental health issues among children and youth. It is estimated, for example, that at least one in five students in American schools will experience a mental health disorder by adolescence (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). But even students *not* identified as having behavioral or emotional disorders may occasionally have episodes of agitation triggered by situational factors such as peer bullying, frustration over poor academic performance, stressful family relationships, or perceived mistreatment by educators.

Since virtually any professional working in schools might at some point find him/herself needing to 'talk down' a student who presents as emotionally upset, all educators should know the basics of how to de-escalate the agitated student. The advice offered in this checklist is adapted for use by schools from research on best practices in calming individuals in medical or psychiatric settings (Cowin et al., 2003; Fishkind, 2002; Richmond et al., 2012). These strategies are intended to be used in a flexible manner to increase the odds that an educator can respond efficiently and effectively to students who present with a wide range of emotional issues.

- Create a 'safe' setting.* An educator attempting to calm an agitated student cannot always select the setting in which that interaction plays out. When a student outburst occurs in the classroom, however, the educator should attempt to engage the student in a semi-private conversation (e.g., off to the side of the room) rather than having an exchange in front of classmates. As part of the protocol for conducting a de-escalation conference, adults should also ensure that they are never left alone with agitated students.
- Limit the number of adults involved.* Having too many educators (e.g., teacher and a teaching assistant) participating in a de-escalation conference can be counter-productive because of possible confusion and communication of mixed messages to the agitated student. If more than one adult is available in the instructional setting, select the one with the most experience with de-escalation techniques to engage the student one-to-one, while the additional educator(s) continue to support the instruction or behavior management of other students.
- Provide adequate personal space.* Stand at least 2 arm's length of distance away from the agitated student. If the student tells you to 'back off' or 'get away', provide the student with additional space.
- Do not block escape routes.* When individuals are agitated, they are more likely to experience a 'fight-or-flight' response that can express itself in the need to have escape routes available. When engaging a student in a de-escalation conference, do not position yourself between the student and the door. If the student says, "Get out of my way", step back to give that student additional personal space and reposition yourself out of his or her potential escape path.
- Show open, accepting body language.* Convey through stance and body language that you are calm and accepting of the student--and will treat that student respectfully and maintain his or her safety. Stand at an angle

CAUTION: The guidelines presented below are intended for use with a student whose agitated behavior is largely verbal, shows no signs of escalating beyond that point, and does not present as potentially physically aggressive or violent. Educators who suspect that a student may present a safety risk to self or others should *immediately* seek additional assistance. Schools should also conduct Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs), assemble appropriate Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) and--if needed--create Crisis Response Plans to manage the behaviors of students who show patterns of escalating, potentially violent behaviors.



rather than facing the student directly in a 'confrontational' pose. Keep hands open and visible to the student. Stand comfortably, with knees slightly bent. Avoid 'clenched' body language such as crossing arms or balling hands into fists.

- Keep verbal interactions respectful.* It is natural for educators to experience feelings of defensiveness, embarrassment, anxiety, or irritation when attempting to talk down a student from an emotional outburst. However, you should strive to appear calm and to treat the student respectfully at all times. Avoid use of teasing, reprimands, or other negative comments and abstain as well from sarcasm or an angry tone of voice.
- Communicate using simple, direct language.* When people are emotionally upset, they may not process language quickly or with complete accuracy. In talking with the student, keep your vocabulary simple and your sentences brief. Be sure to allow sufficient time for the student to think about and respond to each statement before continuing. In particular, if the student does not respond to a statement, avoid falling into the trap of assuming too quickly that the student is simply 'ignoring you'. Instead, calmly repeat yourself--several times if necessary. So long as the student's behavior is not escalating, give him or her the benefit of the doubt and use gentle repetition to help the student to focus on and respond to you.
- Coach the student to take responsibility for moderating behavior.* At the point in an encounter with an agitated student when you feel that you have established rapport, you can use a positive, assertive tone to prompt the student to take responsibility for controlling his or her own behavior (e.g., "John, it is hard for me to follow what you are saying when you raise your voice and pace around the room. If you sit down and calmly explain what the problem is, I think that I can help.").
- Reassure the student and frame an outcome goal.* You can often help to defuse the student's agitation by reassuring the student (e.g., "You're not in trouble. This is your chance to give me your side of the story") and stating an outcome goal ("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"). Also, if you do not know the agitated student whom you are approaching, introduce yourself and state both your name and position.
- Identify the student's wants and feelings.* Use communication tools such as active listening (e.g., "Let me repeat back to you what I thought I heard you say"), open-ended questions (e.g., "What do you need right now to be able to calm yourself?"), and labeling of emotions ("Rick, you look angry. Tell me what is bothering you") to better understand how the student feels and what may be driving the current emotional outburst.
- Identify points of agreement.* A powerful strategy to build rapport with an agitated student is to find points on which you can agree. At the same time, of course, you must preserve your professional integrity as an educator and therefore cannot falsely express agreement on issues that you in fact disagree with. Here are suggestions for finding authentic common ground with the student in response to different situations. (1) Agreement with student's account: If you essentially agree with the student's account of (and/or emotional reaction to) the situation, you can say so (e.g., "I can understand why you were upset when you lost your book on the field trip. I would be upset too."); (2) Agreement with a principle expressed or implied by the student: If you are unsure of the objectivity of the student's account, you might still discern within it a principle that you can support (e.g., If the student claims to have been disrespected by a hall monitor, you can say, "I think everybody has the right to feel respected."); (3) Agreement with the typicality of the student response: If you decide that the student's emotional response would likely be shared by a substantial number of peers, you can state that observation (e.g., "So I gather that you were pretty frustrated when you learned that you are no longer sports-eligible because of your report card grades. I am sure that there are other students here who feel the same way.");(4) Agreement to disagree: If you cannot find a point on which you can agree with the student or validate an aspect of his or her viewpoint, you should simply state that you and the student agree to disagree.



References

Cowin, L., Davies, R., Estall, G., Berlin, T., Fitzgerald, M., & Hoot, S. (2003). De-escalating aggression and violence in the mental health setting. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing, 12*, 64-73.

Fishkind, A. (2002). Calming agitation with words, not drugs: 10 commandments for safety. *Current Psychiatry, 1*(4), 32-39. Available at: http://www.currentpsychiatry.com/pdf/0104/0104_Fishkind.pdf

Richmond, J. S., Berlin, J. S., Fishkind, A. B., Holloman, G. H., Zeller, S. L., Wilson, M. P., Rifai, M. A., & Ng, A. T. (2012). Verbal de-escalation of the agitated patient: Consensus statement of the American Association for Emergency Psychiatry Project BETA de-escalation workgroup. *Western Journal of Emergency Medicine, 13*(1), 17-25.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1999). *Mental health: A report of the Surgeon General*. Rockville, MD: Author.