

DE-ESCALATION

"For traumatized children school will either confirm that the world is filled with unresponsive, threatening adults and peers or these children will learn that there are places that are safe, stimulating and even fun." Dr. Dave Ziegler

Children coping with high levels of community violence become overly reactive because they are constantly anxious about their safety, and have negative expectations about the motivations of others. Their behaviors are often categorized as aggressive, defiant, and oppositional. Consequently, educators' interactions with them become increasingly focused on punitive discipline and reactive behavior management, rather than on developing their talents and skills.

To guard against spiraling into a pattern of negative teacher-student interactions, these research-to-practice briefs are dedicated to discussing relational discipline (developing and utilizing strong, mutually respectful, student-teacher relationships to engage cooperation in the classroom) and verbal de-escalation (listening and communication skills that prevent conflict escalation).

The Basics of De-Escalation

The research on de-escalation tends to agree that in order to reduce risk, intervention methods should adhere to several basic characteristics. This brief is to introduce educators to the characteristics that the research evidence has suggested contribute to more effective de-escalators. Although much of the research on de-escalation comes from the health services field it helpfully suggests how teachers might improve their practices when managing the behaviors of students experiencing and emotional outburst. These are skills that all educators need.

Be Open

Teachers who want to be effective at de-escalating tense, potentially violent, situations in the

classroom must not dismiss or minimize students' needs. You need to be open to hearing out frustrated or aggressive students, encouraging them to verbalize their frustrations. De-escalators have the most success when they are empathetic and express a desire to help and support someone exhibiting aggressive behavior. This demeanor allows you to establish a connection of trust in the effort to make an aggressive student feel less threatened. Empathetic responses that show real concern on behalf of the teacher also validate the student's anxieties making them feel understood and will hopefully then reduce the need for further aggressive behavior. If the student feels safe and is engaging with a non-judgmental teacher,

rather than a threatening one, they are more likely to calm down and verbally communicate their needs.

Be Calm

Most likely one of the most difficult requirements of de-escalating an interaction is remembering to keep your cool. Remaining calm displays that the you are in control and trusts the student. When a teacher loses their cool, reacting to an aggressive student in a highly emotional way, the student learns that they have agitated you and now has more control of the situation. Instead, teachers who appear impervious to students' aggressive behaviors reinforce their control in the classroom. One tip for maintaining a calm demeanor is to focus your attention on the student's behavior rather than whatever reactions they elicit inside you.

Be Diplomatic

Both verbal and non-verbal communications are impactful in influencing aggressive behavior. Teachers should be careful in how they present themselves to aggressive students. Beyond not raising your voice and choosing your words carefully, you must be mindful of your body language when attempting to de-escalate a conflict filled interaction. Posture and eye contact can be read as dismissive or hostile and so teachers may not want to hold their bodies in certain ways, such as crossing their arms or holding intense eye contact. These types of behaviors may be taken as

an aggressive or dismissive response and escalate the interaction. You should also be careful to not invade a student's personal space; being too close or unwanted touch may be perceived as threatening and only further escalate the situation. If the student tells you to "back off" or "get away," give them the personal space they need to feel safe.

Be Thoughtful

It is important to remember that often aggression is more than simply a response to the current moment. Instead, student aggression may be a response to troubled or traumatic past experiences, and something that happened in the classroom may have triggered that past trauma. The aggressive student may also be unsure about how to deal with complex emotions and are displacing them in their interactions with peers and teachers. For these reasons, it is important to learn about students' lives outside of school to understand what may be causing the student to

De-escalation often requires you to do the opposite of what you feel. This means appearing calm, unemotional, centered, and self-assured even though you are probably feeling anxious and unsafe.

exhibit challenging behaviors at school. It is also beneficial to look for patterns to identify potential triggers, and which teacher actions will be read as calming or threatening.

Adapted from:

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