Managing and Understanding Escalating Behavior

Jennifer Tachell, Ed.S.
Statewide Lead Tier 1 Coordinator -- Idaho Positive Behavior Network

3rd Annual Idaho Positive Behavior Network Conference
2018
Objectives

• Enhance our understanding of, and ways of responding to, escalating behavior sequences

• Identify what to do and what to avoid doing when responding to a behavior escalation
All Behavior is Purposeful
To obtain something
To avoid something
Where Do Triggers Come From?

- **Low energy**
  - Lower tolerance level
- **History**
  - Often protective
- **Beliefs**
  - How others ‘should’ behave
- **Expectations**
  - Gap between expectation and reality
- **Fear**
Put on your own (emotional) oxygen mask first!

WHY: before you can help a child manage his/her escalation, you must first manage your own emotions

– Be aware of your triggers

STOP: be mindful of what is going on

– Intentional depersonalization

– 99.9% of the time it has NOTHING TO DO WITH YOU

– If you can do this, you’ve won 2/3 of the battle
Thinking About Triggers

- Academic challenges
  - Work is too hard
  - Work is too easy
- Break-ups
- Family issues
  - Divorce
  - Jail
  - Death
- Poverty
- Abuse/Trauma
- Feeling overwhelmed

- Behavioral challenges
- Friendship issues
- Deployment
- Bullying
- Illness
- Grief/Loss
- Recess
- Anxiety
- Feeling unsafe
- Feeling humiliated
Table Talk: Triggers

• What pushes your buttons?

• What might be some triggers for the students you work with?
The MODEL

Behavior Intensity

High

Low

Time

Calm

Trigger

Agitation

Acceleration

Peak

De-escalation

Recovery
The Phases of Escalation

1. Calm
   - Student is cooperative

2. Trigger
   - Student experiences a series of unresolved conflicts

3. Agitation
   - Student exhibits increasingly unfocused behavior

4. Acceleration
   - Student displays focused behavior

5. Peak
   - Student is out of control and displays most severe problem behavior

6. De-escalation
   - Student displays confusion but with decreases in severe behavior

7. Recovery
   - Student displays willingness to participate in non-engagement activities
1. **Calm**

   The student is **cooperative**
   - Accepts corrective feedback
   - Follows directives
   - Sets personal goals
   - Ignores distractions
   - Accepts praise
   - Neocortex is online, learning happens here
1. Calm

- Intervention is focused on prevention
  - Arrange for high rates of successful academic and social engagements
  - Use positive reinforcement
  - Teach social skills
    - Problem solving
    - Relaxation strategies
    - Self-regulation
  - Communicate positive expectations
2. Trigger

Student experiences a series of unresolved conflicts

- Repeated failures
- Frequent corrections
- Interpersonal conflicts
- Timelines
- Low rates of positive reinforcement
- Personal issues (home, illness)
2. Trigger

• Intervention is focused on prevention and redirection
  – Remove from or modify context
  – Increase opportunities for success
  – Reinforce what has been taught
  – Side conversations between staff can be useful here
  – Sometimes the trigger is YOU
3. Agitation

Student exhibits increasingly **unfocused** behavior

- Off-task
- Frequent start/stop on tasks
- Out of seat
- Talking with others
- Social withdrawal/shut down
- Neocortex/ frontal lobes going offline now
3. Agitation

• Intervention is focused on reducing anxiety
  • Make structural/environmental modifications
  • Provide reasonable options and choices
    – Modifying the assignment now doesn’t mean the student will manipulate in the future
  • Involve in successful engagements

• Moving into brain stem: fight, flight, or freeze
4. Acceleration

Student displays focused behavior

– May be:
  • Provocative
  • High intensity
  • Threatening
  • Personal

– Think of the squirrels!
4. Acceleration

• Intervention is focused on safety
  – Remember…
    • Escalations and self-control are inversely related
    • Escalation is likely to run its course

• Student is in brain stem: neocortex is offline
4. Acceleration

• Remove all **triggering**, competing, and maintaining factors
  – Room clear?

• Follow crisis **response** procedures

• **Disengage** from student: they can’t hear you anyway
5. Peak

Student is out of control and displays **most severe** problem behavior

- Physical aggression
- Property destruction
- Self-injury
- Escape/social withdrawal
- Hyperventilation
5. Peak

• Intervention is focused on **safety**
  – Procedures similar to acceleration phase, except focus is on crisis **management**
  – Follow district protocol
6. De-escalation

Student displays confusion but with decreases in severe behavior

- Social withdrawal/shut down
- Denial
- Blaming others
- Minimization of problem
- Scared, not sure what just happened
6. De-escalation

- Intervention is focused on removing excess attention
  - Don’t nag
  - Avoid blaming
  - Don’t force apology
  - Emphasize starting anew: keep moving forward

- Avoid re-escalation
7. Recovery

Student displays willingness to participate in **non-engagement** activities

- Attempts to correct problem
- Unwillingness to participate in group activities
- Social withdrawal and sleep
- Adrenaline dump is over -- exhaustion
7. Recovery

• Intervention is focused on re-establishing routines and activities
  – Follow through with consequences for problem behavior if student is back to baseline
  – Positively reinforce any displays of appropriate behavior!
7. Recovery

• Debrief
  – Purpose of debrief is to facilitate transition back to normal program
  – Debrief follows consequences for problem behavior
  – Goal is to increase more appropriate behavior
7. Recovery

- Problem solving example:
  - What did I do? (define the problem)
  - Why did I do it?
  - What could I have done instead? (create possible solutions)
  - What do I have to do next? (make a plan)
  - Can I do that?
  - If not, whose help would I like?
Debrief with Staff

• Check in, make sure staff is okay
  – This important step is often skipped!
  – Offers staff a chance to reflect on what happened and process their reactions/emotions/thoughts
  – Important that time is taken to debrief before the end of the day (whenever possible)
    • Does anyone need a break?
    • Was there anything we could have done differently?
    • Who is following up with what?
3 Key Strategies for Managing Escalating Behavior

1. Identify how to intervene early in an escalation (triggers?)
2. Identify environmental factors that can be manipulated
3. Identify replacement behaviors that can be taught
Teaching Replacement Behaviors

Students must:

• Be fluent at expected behavior
• Be taught conditions under which the expected behavior is required
• Have multiple opportunities for high rates of successful academic and social engagement
• Receive or experience frequent and positive acknowledgments when expected behavior is exhibited
Teaching Replacement Behaviors

Teachers must:

• Have student’s attention, before presenting the directive or making a request
• Give clear, specific, positively stated directives
• Provide frequent, positive acknowledgments when expected behavior is exhibited
• Have established and taught consequence procedures for repeated noncompliance
Final Thought

“If you inadvertently assist the student to escalate, do not be concerned; you will get another chance to do it right the next time around.”

Geoff Colvin
Activity: Responding to Escalating Problem Behavior

1. Read the vignette and respond to the questions.

2. Discuss examples from your school.
   • Why do you think this student is having trouble at school?
   • What triggers are occurring across this student’s day that continue to escalate his behavior?