Conflict and aggressive behavior among students disrupts learning by preventing the development of psychologically healthy school environments (Baker, Dilly, Aupperlee, & Patil, 2003). When conflict reaches the point that a student’s behavior threatens the safety of other students it becomes even more of a concern. It is important for schools to have strategies to diffuse student conflicts before they grow out of control. However, conflicts among adolescents can escalate from minor disagreements to serious threats in very little time and for this reason schools must have strategies for intervening when conflict has already begun to grow.

What Is Conflict De-escalation?

Conflict de-escalation is a broad term used to describe a wide variety of techniques that are useful in reducing tension between two people or two groups. In school settings, conflict de-escalation is typically performed by adults in situations when conflict has the potential to become violent. These adults usually have received some degree of training on how to help others manage or express powerful emotions without resorting to aggressive behaviors.

Conflict in Schools

Conflict in middle and high schools occurs for many reasons. Conflict often arises due to the developmental stage of adolescence. Youth at this stage are searching for identity and individuality, seeking independence from adults, and testing adult limits. While this is a natural process, some students choose behavior that results in negative interaction that has the potential to be self-harming or dangerous to others. Homework, rules and other issues may also provoke conflict with adults. Another reason conflict arises is for retribution, such as in cases when a student feels insulted, or when they perceive that an injustice has occurred (Crawford & Bodine, 2001). The Search Institute conducted a survey of 99,000 sixth to twelfth grade youth and the results of the survey found that 41 percent reported that, “when provoked, they could not control anger and would fight“ (Search Institute, 1997; Crawford & Bodine, 2001, p. 21). In other words, significant portions of youth on campuses across the nation believe that anger and aggressive action is their only option when confronted with a frustrating or difficult situation. Another leading cause of conflict among youth in high school is events resulting from miscommunication, misunderstanding, or differing perspectives. Misunderstandings are particularly problematic for youth who are delayed developmentally or who have mental health issues (Pickhardt, 2009).
Punitive Action

When conflict occurs between students, teachers and administrators commonly respond by punishing one or both sides of the conflict (e.g. loss of privileges, being sent to the office, suspension; Maag, 2001). However, these consequences for disruptive or aggressive student behavior have proven to be ineffective at diminishing or preventing inappropriate behavior or reducing interpersonal conflicts (e.g. Sprague, Walker, Golly, White, Myers, & Shannon, 2001; Sugai & Horner, 2006).

Some research has suggested that schools could reduce or prevent conflict by training staff and students on how to manage intense emotion and aggressive behaviors (Banks, & Zionts, 2009; Maag, 2008). For example, staff and students could be trained on the Conflict Cycle and the Phases of Acting-Out Cycle.

The Conflict Cycle

Long and Duffner (1980) have explained how stress can increase to the point that it interferes with student’s ability to cope, resulting in a cycle of problematic behavior. Originally called the “Stress Cycle,” Long has since renamed it the “Conflict Cycle.” Long and Duffner use the Conflict Cycle to explain how an individual’s irrational thoughts and pre-existing beliefs can be triggered by stimuli in the environment, beginning a negative cycle that may lead to aggressive or disruptive behavior.

Students and teachers alike have irrational beliefs. When triggered by an event in the environment the Conflict Cycle begins. The possible irrational beliefs a person may hold are limitless (e.g., Sapp, 1996), however a common irrational belief among students with emotional and behavioral disorders (E/BD) is that the teacher is persecuting them. It can be very helpful to train students to recognize the Conflict Cycle in their own life and provide them with the tools to stop it (Squires, 2001). Teachers hold irrational beliefs as well, and it is equally important to help teachers learn to recognize and stop their own Conflict Cycle in order to help them work with challenging students (Maag, 2008).

The Conflict Cycle is comprised of four components: 1) the stressful event or...
incident, 2) the Student’s Emotions, 3) Observable Behavior, and 4) teacher reactions. Irrational beliefs alone do not explain conflict; an event must trigger the cycle. Common stressful events for students can include receiving a poor grade or being excluded or teased by peers. The stressful event can trigger strong feelings within the student. At-risk students may be more likely to become overwhelmed by these feelings. These powerful feelings can quickly lead to an observable behavior that is deemed inappropriate or disruptive to the classroom. The teacher must then respond to the student’s “acting-out” behavior in order to maintain order in the classroom. However, the teacher often does not understand the context of the student’s behavior and their response is frequently viewed as punitive. In fact, the punitive response of the teacher may very well lead to another stressful event for the student which triggers more powerful emotions and keeps the conflict cycle spiraling further. In addition, this process may become a trigger for the teacher, and now the Conflict Cycle is escalating for both student and teacher. Unless this process is interrupted it is likely to escalate and could potentially result in aggressive or violent behavior.

### Interrupting the Conflict Cycle?

When a teacher observes that an event has triggered stress for a student he or she could engage the student to help them explore those feelings. Asking the student to explain what occurred and how they are feeling can have several positive effects. First, this question validates the student’s feelings. Behaviors may be inappropriate for several reasons but emotions are never inappropriate. Students are entitled to feel their own feelings. Acknowledging the student’s feelings and asking them to explain their experience may also serve as a cognitive disconnect, shifting their focus from aggressive thoughts to reflective and interrupting the conflict cycle. The process of engaging a student and helping them express their feelings, validates their feelings, interrupts the escalating conflict cycle, and it may begin to alter the student’s pre-existing irrational belief that “the teacher is out to get me.”

### Tips to Avoid Crisis

The following is an abbreviated version of suggestions recommended by the Mayo Clinic Staff:

1. Take a time out- take a few minutes to clear your thoughts.
2. Once you’re calm, express your anger.
3. Get some exercise.
4. Think before you speak.
5. Identify possible solutions.
7. Don’t hold a grudge.
8. Use humor to release tension.
9. Practice relaxation skills.
10. Know when to seek help.

These simple strategies have proven to have powerful impacts on both adults and adolescents ability to prevent explosive conflict by helping them become aware of and to express their emotions in a positive manner. (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2011)

Once the crisis has passed, teachers can follow up with the student to help them understand the difference between angry feelings and aggressive behaviors, reinforcing the concept that the student is entitled to their feelings but when behaviors affect the learning or safety of others then negative consequences inevitably follow. Teachers could then teach the student coping strategies for dealing with stress in order to help them deal with the next time the experience a trigger.

Long (1991) described that when working with students with behavior problems, teachers are likely to experience many of the same emotions as their students. It is perhaps even more important for teachers to understand their own emotional state and choose their behavior carefully. There are many coping strategies that could be employed by students and teachers alike.

In helpful list of suggestions for educators...
who are attempting to de-escalate a crisis, the Crisis Prevention Institute recommends staff: (1) remain calm, (2) isolate the individual, (3) keep it simple, (4) use neutral body language, (5) use silence, (6) use reflective questioning, and (7) avoid “para-verbals” [insure body language or voice inflection is not in contradiction to what is being communicated] (CPI, 2012).

**Phases of the Acting Out Cycle**

Colvin’s Phases of the Acting Out Cycle (1994; 1995) describe the phases of a behavioral crisis. These seven phases are: 1) calm, 2) trigger, 3) agitation, 4) cancelation, 6) de-escalation, and 7) recovery. It is important for teachers and school staff to be able to identify what phase a student is in. Misidentifying which stage a student is in may result in an ineffective intervention or may actually serve as another trigger, further escalating the cycle. While in the calm phase a student is generally on task and engaging in appropriate behavior. In this stage teachers can focus their efforts on managing the student’s attention and on providing positive reinforcing feedback.

In the trigger phase a student is just beginning to react negatively towards a stimulus event. Some triggers occur over time (lack of sleep or stress); others take immediate effect (being physically harmed or threatened). In the trigger phase a teacher can acknowledge the event and offer possible coping or problem strategies. Teachers could also make a referral to appropriate resources such as counseling services or programs for free school meals. In the agitation phase the student’s behavior is beginning to deteriorate. In this stage a teacher could intervene by moving closer to the student to re-engage them, or help them find a quiet space to be alone.

During the acceleration phase the student will begin to negatively engage others. They may already be noncompliant or openly defiant. At this point a teacher should avoid behaviors such as yelling, arguing, or invading the student’s personal space (the need for which increases with emotional distress). These actions may trigger a “flight or fight” response from a distressed youth. To help a student in the acceleration stage a teacher could try to re-direct the student by emphasizing student choices, responsibilities, and possible consequences. Helping the student engage in problem solving strategies is essential.

The peak phase is the height of the conflict and the student has lost control of his or her emotions. The primary goal for teachers in this stage shifts from engaging the student to ensuring the safety of the student and others. After

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the peak phase, the student will began to tire and calm down. This marks the beginning of the de-escalation phase. Teachers and staff should not try to debrief the student this phase as it may re-trigger the cycle. Instead, teachers should engage the student by extending simple requests such as cleaning up and mess they made or returning to their seat.

In the recovery phase the student will begin thinking more clearly and demonstrate more willingness to return to the normal classroom structure. At this point a teacher could debrief the student by helping them explore (a) what happened, (b) the student’s thought process during the cycle, (c) the student’s actions and decisions, and (d) alterative behaviors that could have resulted in a more positive outcome. It is important that teachers remember to be reflective listeners and to use the phrase, “What I hear you saying is...Is that right?” The debriefing time during the recovery phase may be a excellent opportunity for learning to take place. During this phase students may be more open and willing to talk and this may be a useful time for counseling (Redl & Wineman, 1952; Redl, 1980; Wood and Long, 1991).

Conclusion

All students will experience conflict during the course of their education. Students with emotional or behavioral difficulties may experience even more trouble than other students at managing these stressful times. Teachers and administrators can be a valuable resource to all students when they, learn about the Conflict and Acting Out Cycles as well as learn to monitor their own emotions. Teachers become aware of their own triggers and irrational beliefs, and help their students to do the same. This brief has described several strategies teachers can use to help them prevent and intervene when conflict arises in school. Conflict de-escalation skills are essential for all educators.

Recommended citation:


Conflict De-Escalation References


Dufresne, J. (2003). Communication is the key to crisis de-escalation. Law and Order, 51(8), 72-75. Publisher: http://www.lawandordermag.com


