Conflict De-escalation

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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 in schools. 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 in which 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 amongst youth. Misunderstandings are particularly problematic for youth who are delayed developmentally or who have mental health issues (Pickhardt, 2009).

Finally, a large number of students may have also have mental health diagnoses for which aggression and conflict are part of a pattern of symptoms. These students, whether receiving treatment or not, may be more likely to present with oppositional and defiant behaviors in school and which increase the likelihood of conflict.

Punitive Action. When conflict occurs between students, teachers and administers 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 preventing future inappropriate behavior and interpersonal conflicts (e.g., Sprague et al., 2001; Sugai & Horner, 2006).

Staff Training. Some research has suggested that schools could reduce or prevent conflict by training staff and students on how to manage intense emotions and aggressive behaviors (Banks & Zionts, 2009; Maag, 2008). There are numerous training vendors across the country which specialize in crisis intervention training for schools (e.g., Crisis Prevention Institute, The

Mandt System®, Pro-ACT, etc). While these programs are often known for their training of physical restraint procedures, they all spend a portion of training on explaining the conflict cycle and demonstrating crisis de-escalation strategies. Additionally, most of these programs offer specific subsets of training, allowing school administrators to purchase crisis de-escalation training for all of their staff members through these vendors. Outside of these trainings, educators and students alike 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.

From Long, N., Wood, M.M. & Fescar, F.A. (2001). *Life space crisis intervention (2nd Edition).* Austin, TX: PRO-ED, p. 25

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 when it ocurs (Squires, 2001). Teachers hold irrational beliefs as well, and it is equally important to help teachers learn to recognize and stop the 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. A stressful event often coincides with irrational beliefs triggers the conflict cycle. Common stressful events for students can include receiving a poor grade, or being excluded or teased by peers. The stressful event can elicit strong feelings or emotions within a 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 the teacher's response is frequently viewed as punitive by the student. In fact, the punitive response of the teacher may introduce 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 the student and the teacher (see Figure 2). Unless this process is interrupted, it is likely to escalate and could potentially result in aggressive or violent behavior.

Interrupting the Conflict Cycle

Once teachers understand the conflict cycle, they can then learn to inerrupt a student who is in the 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 and 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 to reflective thoughts, and interrupting the conflict cycle. This process of engaging the student may alter the student's pre-existing irrational belief that "the teacher is out to get me." Once the crisis has passed, teachers can

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.
6. Stick with "I" versus. "You" statements.
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)

follow up with the student to help him or her understand the difference between angry feelings and aggressive behaviors, reinforcing the concept that the student is entitled to his or her feelings. However, when behaviors affect the learning or safety of others, negative consequences inevitably will follow. Teachers could then teach the student coping strategies for dealing with stress in order to help them the next time he or she experiences a trigger. The Mayo Clinic (2011) offers some coping strategies recommendations which are listed in the box on page 3.

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.

The Crisis Prevention Institute, a program which provides crisis de-escalation training to schools, recommends a helpful list of suggestions for educators who are attempting to de-escalate a crisis: (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 "paraverbals" (e.g., insure body language or voice inflection is not in contradiction to what is being communicated; Crisis Prevention Institute [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 (See figure below). 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 addition, providing clear and brief expectations is important because when students understand what is expected of them, problem behaviors typically decrease and students tend to stay in the calm phase (Colvin & Scott, 2015). Finally, instructing students in a way that engages them will also help to prevent problem behaviors in
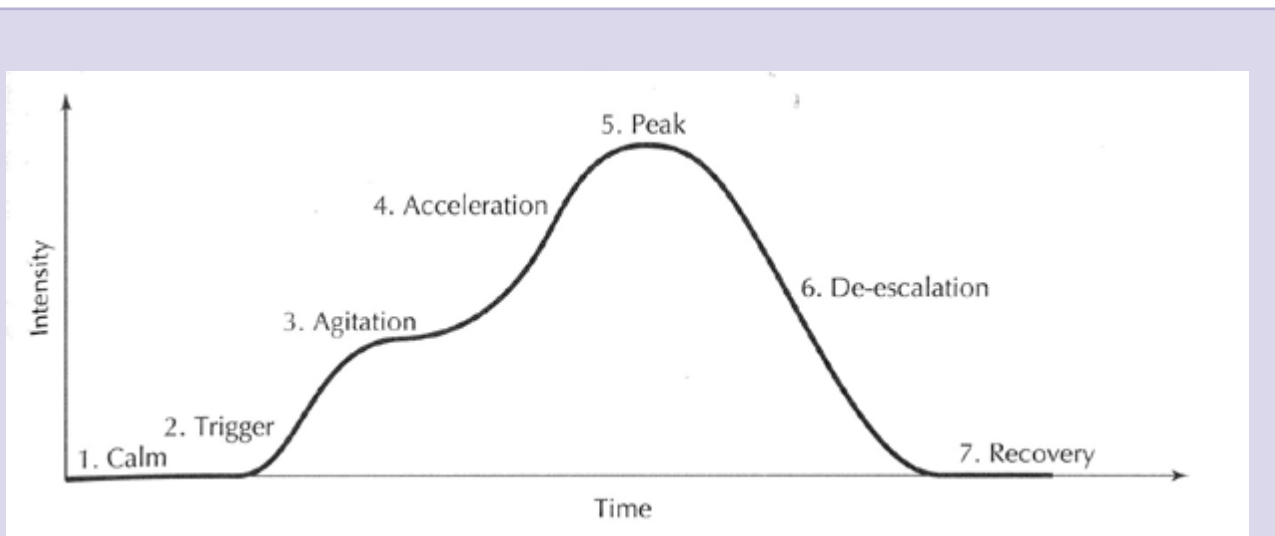

From Colvin, J. (2004). *Managing the cycle of acting-out behavior in the classroom.* Eugene, OR: Behavior Associates, p.4. Reprinted with permission.

the classroom; establishing an expectation for whole-class responding is an example (Colvin & Scott, 2015).

In the **trigger phase** a student is just beginning to react negatively towards a stimulus event and it increases the student's agitation level. Triggers can occur at school (e.g., peer conflict), and/or occur outside of school (e.g., inadequate nutrition; Colvin & Scott, 2015). In addition, some triggers occur over time (e.g., lack of sleep or stress), while others take immediate affect (e.g., being physically harmed or threatened). In the trigger phase, a teacher can acknowledge the event and offer possible problem-solving strategies. Teachers could also make a referral to appropriate resources such as counseling services or programs for free school meals. Conversely, teachers can manage triggers that occur in schools with precorrective strategies. Colvin and Scott (2015) recommend that teachers identify triggers for a student's problem behavior and then adopt strategies to implement before the problem behavior occurs.

In the **agitation phase** the student's behavior can go one of two ways; a response demonstrating a decrease in behavior (e.g., putting head on desk) or a response demonstrating an increase in behavior (e.g., tapping pencil quickly). 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. Another useful strategy a teacher can use to calm a student in the agitation phase is to demonstrate empathy for the student by explaining that he or she understands the student's point of view (Colvin & Scott, 2015).

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 and are often referred to as escalating prompts (Colvin & Scott, 2015). When a student is in this stage, it is helpful for educators to have a re-

Handle Anger Constructively
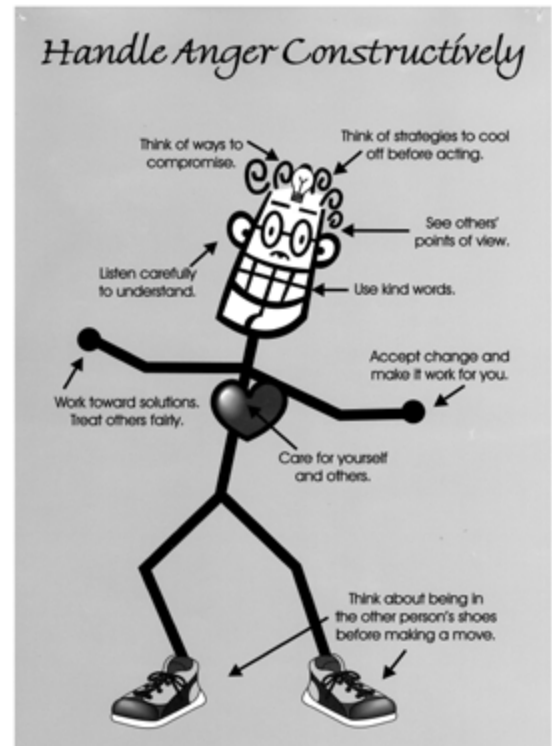
sponse ready to say, walk away from the situation in order to regain composure, and return to talk to the student later (Colvin & Scott, 2015). In addition, a teacher could try to re-direct the student by emphasizing student choices, responsibilities, and possible consequences. Helping the student engage in problem-solving strategies is essential. 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 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). It is important to understand that student's can start at any point in the cycle; for instance, many students may come to school each day already in the agitation stage (e.g., lack of sleep, lack of proper nutrition, etc.).

Preventive Strategies

Although there are many strategies to implement during the Conflict Cycle, there are a number of Tier 1 strategies that teachers and administrators can use to prevent problem behaviors from occurring. It is outside the scope of this brief to discuss all of these strategies, but we will list and briefly describe a few of them here.

Instructional Strategies. The strategies listed in Table 1 are low-intensity strategies offered by Lane, Menzies, Bruhn, & Crnobori (2011) and are designed to engage students in the class content in order to avoid problem behaviors from occurring. These antecedent strategies are designed to be used in addition to classroom management techniques.

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. When teachers become aware of their own triggers and irrational beliefs, they can better 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:

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For additional, mored detailed information about this topic, see:
Colvin, G., & Scott, T. M. (2015). Managing the cycle of acting-out behavior in the classroom (Rev. 2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Low Intensity Strategies
Active Supervision. Visually scanning, moving about, and interacting with students while supervising a classroom or other designated area.
Appropriate use of praise. Using specific, appropriate, and continent praise to provide feedback to a student on his or her behavior or work.
Choice and preferred activities. Offering students the opportunity to choose which instructional activity they would like to complete. This increases on-task behavior and decreases problem behaviors.
Formal teaching of prosocial behaviors. Teaching specific social skills in either a small-group or whole-class format to address deficits in social skills. Teachers can purchase prepackaged curricula or develop their own.
Instructive feedback. Providing more efficient learning for students by providing information about student responses. Once a student has responded, the teacher can present new or additional information or emphasize already learned concepts. The information is not necessarily corrective.
Opportunities to respond. Creating frequent opportunities for students to respond to teacher inquires. Teachers should provide approximately four to six opportunities to respond per minute. The response can be individual, choral, verbal, written, or indicated through a gesture or signal.
Overlappingness and with-it-ness. Attending to more than one classroom event at a time and communicating to students, verbally or nonverbally, that the teacher is monitoring all students' activities.
Pacing. Moving through a lesson with appropriate momentum. Instruction should be smooth and focused and should eliminate common teacher behaviors that slow down the pace.
Proximity. Standing in close physical proximity in order to cue a student to appropriate behavior. Do not stand so close as to appear threatening.
Token economies. A class-wide system to systematically reinforce students for positive behavior.

Table 1. Low intentisty strategies to use at the universal level to reduce conflict. Content taken from Lane, Menzies, Bruhn, & Crobori, 2011.

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