

DE-ESCALATION SKILLS



Anger is a strong emotion, one that can consume and cause loss of rational thought. Many a person has hurt another in anger only to be very regretful later when clearer thoughts returned. Our primary goal is to avert physical aggression, de-escalate angry outbursts, and at a later time, process the situation with the student and connect them to any necessary skill-building groups or programs. This is true achievement in terms of classroom management and remaining in control, which has more beneficial and long-lasting outcomes for the student, yourself, and witnessing students than does restraint or other methods.

Awareness is the First Key

First of all, become attuned to signals of potential crisis behavior. By being aware of such signals, we can help de-escalate the behaviors and protect ourselves and others.

Typically, there is a change in behavior before physical aggression occurs. Verbal clues (what is said), para-verbal clues (how something is expressed), and body language indicate when one is beginning to lose control. An angry student may curse or threaten. Voice volume and rate typically increase. Body language may include tenseness, pointing fingers, and/or leaning forward as if in an attack mode – including "getting in your face."

When dealing with an angry student, it is of utmost importance to be aware of your own verbal and non-verbal behaviors. The way you respond to a person who is beginning to lose control can unintentionally increase the likelihood of physical aggression or it can help decrease aggression.

How to Respond Verbally

Remain calm and in control - When someone is directing verbal defiance toward you, the natural but incorrect tendency is to respond in a like manner. If another person yells at you, the automatic reaction is to raise your voice, too. Unfortunately, this further activates the emotional centers of the brain, tells the angry person they are under threat, and escalates their reaction. A calm reply and cool head are essential to you remaining in control of the situation. In addition, it models to other students a host of valuable skills.

Listen to the other person and respond empathetically – Don't interrupt. Listen to what is being said. Most (but not all) persons will calm down once they get what is bugging them off their chest. Interrupting and/or denying their feelings tend to elevate the anger. When the person pauses, calmly say something that validates their feelings like, "I understand you are upset." Remain nonjudgmental at this point until more information can be obtained and the problem is addressed.

Be aware of your para-verbals – The three para-verbal components are tone, volume, and rate. An upset person cannot focus as well on your actual words, since the brain's frontal lobes are receiving less blood and the limbic system is activated. Use a tone of voice which is calming. Avoid tones which suggest impatience, disgust, or sarcasm. Volume should be moderate – not too loud or too soft. Speak clearly and slowly. Too rapid or too halting speech conveys agitation and loss of control. By speaking calmly and clearly, you are more likely to de-escalate the student's anger and are more likely to be heard.

Use the student's name – People respond to their name. If you know the student's name, speak it. It gives a 'handle' for the thinking part of the brain to grab onto.

Set limits – Give choices and consequences. This technique gives information to the other person for making a conscious choice. For example, to a verbally abusive student: "If you refrain from cursing, we can discuss your concerns. If not, this conversation is ended until later." To a student who refuses to follow your directive: "If you return to your seat, we can continue this discussion. If you do not, then you must leave the classroom." Choices need to be clear, concise, enforceable, and said with awareness of your para-verbals.

How to Respond Nonverbally

Non-verbals are probably the most important aspect of dealing with a potentially aggressive person. Studies show body language conveys about 55 percent of our message, para-verbal communication about 35 percent, and verbal communication about 10 percent. When dealing with an agitated person, even more is conveyed nonverbally and less verbally.

Respect personal space – Personal space is the area around a person in which he/she feels safe. For most persons and situations, it is about 2 to 3 feet. Entering an upset person's personal space intensifies emotions and is interpreted as a threat, since the brain is in the 'fight or flight' mode. As a general rule, keep at least one leg length away (about 36 inches) to prevent escalation and to increase your own safety.

Maintain an open stance – Slightly turn your body at an angle to the other person. Keep your hands open and in plain view. This stance is less threatening. Do not cross your arms or point your finger.

Eye contact and facial expression should be appropriate to the situation – Your face and eyes convey a direct message to the other person. Maintain general eye contact, but do not stare through the other person. Know cultural habits. Some ethnic groups consider it inappropriate to directly look at another when upset or being disciplined. Your facial expression should be serious but not angry or fearful. You want to convey concern and control.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Choose very small or slight instances at home and at work to really practice your verbals, para-verbals and body language over and over again. Also, any time you find yourself raising your voice or losing your temper, notice those triggering times as opportunities to become more aware, catch yourself, and practice these skills. You will get good at this and feel more confident, calm and in control.

When possible take time in small groups to practice scenarios, especially for setting limits. Get feedback from colleagues. Ask your building's mental health professional to set up an 'exercise' for your group or department.

Know Your Building's Crisis Plan

Most buildings or districts have specific training, protocols and policies for dealing with physical aggression. Follow those procedures if it becomes necessary.

Sources

De-escalation adapted from:

<http://www.cuyamaca.edu/EOPS/DSPS/conn0598agg.asp>

which also references R. Ladson Berry, *Teaching for Excellence*, volume XLIII, number 9