

DEFUSING ANGER & AGGRESSION

Safe Strategies for Secondary School Teachers

MODULE 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Managing Off-Task Behavior

Schools can no longer claim with certainty that they are safe places for learning. In fact, safety is one of the most pressing needs facing our schools today. According to the National School Safety Center (2006)*:

- In 2005, 28 percent of students ages 12 to 18 reported being bullied at school during the previous six months. Of these, 24 percent said they were injured as a result of the incident.
- Between 1998 and 2002, teachers were the victims of 144,000 thefts and 90,000 violent crimes (rape, sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and simple assault) at school.
- In 2003, six percent of students in grades 9-12 reported carrying a gun, knife or club to school within the previous 30 days.

*NSSC Review of School Safety Research (2006). Westlake Village, CA: National School Safety Center.

Educators have to deal with antisocial behavior on a daily basis.

Here are some facts:

- Antisocial behavior early in a child's life is the single best predictor of delinquency in adolescence.
- 70% of antisocial youth have been arrested at least once within three years of leaving school.
- Aggressive behavior is very stable over time.
- The more severe the antisocial behavior, the less likely it is to change.



What are the solutions:

- The problems must be owned by society as a whole so that symptoms and causes are addressed.
- Multi-dimensional approaches are needed that address the community, school, and home.
- Approaches must be balanced to include incentives for positive behavior as well as deterrent measures for problem behavior.
- All age groups need to be targeted from pre-school through high school.
- Best practices should be used to manage and prevent serious problem behavior.



DEFUSING ANGER & AGGRESSION

Safe Strategies for Secondary School Teachers

MODULE 1: INTRODUCTION

Clearly there are no easy answers or quick fixes to these problems. One small part of the solution lies in how staff manages students' problem behavior. Such behavior can be defused or escalated, managed safely or unsafely. This program addresses this small part of these problems in offering secondary school educators:

- Video vignettes showing a variety of problem behaviors from low level to serious confrontation. These demonstrate that a teacher's response can either defuse or escalate problem behavior.
- Safe strategies for addressing problem behavior early and effectively in order to prevent it from escalating and get students back on track. This strategy is called defusion.



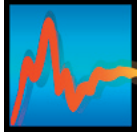
Now let's look at the first of six vignettes that illustrate how a teacher can respond to a variety of problem behaviors.

Here's what needs to happen. First, the teacher needs to keep the class on-task. Second, she needs to get Jason on task, too. Watch the steps the teacher uses to accomplish this:

- Acknowledge students who are on-task
- Take Jason aside
- Redirect Jason's group
- Redirect Jason
- Stay with direction
- Acknowledge Jason's cooperation
- Continue to acknowledge other on-task students

In summary, the teacher avoids responding directly to the off-task behavior and provides a very clear focus for on-task behavior to the class and to Jason.

Note: In this scene Jason gets back to work. If he had refused to do so, the teacher would follow through with a warning or negative consequence.



DEFUSING ANGER & AGGRESSION

Safe Strategies for Secondary School Teachers

MODULE 2: RESPONDING TO PROVOCATIVE BEHAVIOR



We need to keep in mind that in this situation the student fully expects to be corrected by the teacher and to get attention and reinforcement from her peers. In a sense the student plans the challenge through the provocative behavior of breaking a rule. Consequently, when the teacher directs her to correct the matter, the stage is set for a power struggle.

How does the teacher provide directions in response to Sarah's provocative shirt:

- She speaks privately to Sarah
- She identifies the problem
- She asks Sarah to take care of the problem
- She presents Sarah with options
- She asks Sarah to choose an option
- She acknowledges Sarah's cooperation

In general, there are two steps in dealing with provocative behavior:

- Provide a focus for the student to take care of the problem; make it her/his responsibility
- Present choices; do not corner the student by presenting a single option



DEFUSING ANGER & AGGRESSION

Safe Strategies for Secondary School Teachers

MODULE 3: RESPONDING TO DISRESPECTFUL BEHAVIOR

How can a teacher respond to disrespectful behavior and continue with instruction

- First and most important, respond in a calm and controlled manner
- Acknowledge students who are on-task
- Indicate follow-up to the disrespectful student
- Continue with instruction

You'll notice that in the first instance, the teacher takes John's disrespectful behavior personally and responds angrily, setting off a chain reaction that is heading for a serious confrontation.

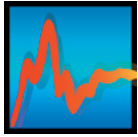


In the second case, the teacher acts in a controlled manner by pausing before he responds. He speaks calmly, acknowledges cooperative students first, then asks to speak to John later. When he follows through with John later, he should point out that John's behavior was disruptive and disrespectful, and that there will be consequences if it happens again. The teacher would also acknowledge that John did settle down and cooperate. If John continues disrupting the class, the teacher would give the class a small, independent task to work on (e.g., silent reading), and then approach John privately, giving him a warning or consequence for disrupting the class.

Here are some guidelines for approaching a disrespectful student:

- Move slowly and deliberately toward the problem situation
- Speak privately
- Speak calmly
- Speak respectfully
- Minimize body language
- Keep a reasonable distance
- Establish eye level position if possible
- Be brief
- Focus on expected behavior
- Withdraw if the problem escalates
- Acknowledge cooperation

In general, managing disrespectful behavior is largely governed by the way we respond to it. If we are calm, controlled and respectful, we are more likely to defuse the situation and avoid escalation.



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Safe Strategies for Secondary School Teachers

MODULE 4: REDUCING AGITATION

The teacher first follows reasonable procedures in trying to get Michael to start work, but the situation escalates because she does not recognize or address his agitation. His body posture, facial expressions and curt responses are all signs that he is agitated.

Why is it important to reduce agitation?

Serious problem behaviors are usually preceded by agitation, so if we address agitation we can avert more serious problems. Besides, when students are agitated their class involvement is limited because they are distracted. There are two critical steps in reducing agitation:



1. *Recognize the signs of agitation*

Agitation can show itself in one of two ways. The agitated student may either

- Become more active
- Shut down and become withdrawn

2. *Use effective strategies to help the student settle down and resume class*

Once you recognize the signs of agitation, here are the steps in addressing it:

- State the task
- Communicate concern
- Allow space
- Attend to other students
- Help student begin work

Here are some strategies for dealing with agitation:

- Give recognition and support
- Provide space
- Present options
- Allow for preferred activities
- Stay in proximity to the student
- Allow for independent activities
- Allow for movement
- Provide relaxation activities
- Involve the student in the plan



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Safe Strategies for Secondary School Teachers

MODULE 5: ESTABLISHING LIMITS



In the first scene, the teacher's response to Carl at first seems reasonable, but the situation escalates into a power struggle. In the second scene, the teacher focuses more on Carl's choice, and is able to direct Carl to begin working. The key to establishing limits is in how the choices are presented, whether the teacher focuses on himself/herself or on the choices.

Here are non-confrontational steps in establishing limits when a student is being insubordinate:

- Present a choice: perform the expected behavior or face a negative consequence
- Allow a few seconds for the student to choose
- Withdraw from the student and attend to other students
- Follow through
 - If the student cooperates, acknowledge the choice and move to other students
 - If the student does not cooperate, follow through with the consequence



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Safe Strategies for Secondary School Teachers

MODULE 6: RESPONDING TO CRISIS BEHAVIOR

As we have seen, in many cases the teacher can defuse a problem. Sometimes, however, a teacher needs to treat a situation as a crisis, such as when a student's behavior indicates drug or alcohol use, possession of a weapon, serious threats, aggression, or unexpected behavior. In these cases, the teacher needs to follow emergency procedures and get help. In responding to crisis behavior, follow these steps:



Step 1: Pause and assess

Do not respond immediately. Look at the floor, look at the student. Keep still. Ask yourself, "Is this an emergency situation?" If your answer is "Yes," move to the next step.

Step 2: Physically disengage and send for help

Say to the student very calmly, respectfully and firmly, "Just a second," and step back in a calm and deliberate manner. Without looking at the student, move to the nearest classroom and follow your school's emergency procedures.

The most important consideration in this scenario is SAFETY FIRST. There is no shame or loss of respect in disengaging from a dangerous situation. Never feel obligated or pressured to take care of such situations by yourself.

Summary

There is no question that educators face serious challenges in dealing with problem behavior. These problems have multiple causes and require multiple solutions. The purpose of this program is to highlight one safe and sensible approach to responding to problem behavior: DEFUSION.

The most common feature of this strategy is to focus on staff behavior. The way we respond to the problem behavior can either defuse or escalate the behavior. The most important message to take away from this program is to recognize the significant effect your responses have on the outcome, and to examine your own way of responding to problem behavior.

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