

Understanding and Responding to the Acting Out Cycle

The TREP Project works to connect research on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences of developmental trauma with the realities of school and classroom management. We focus on schools serving communities coping with high levels of concentrated poverty and social disorganization, such as housing and food instability, household and neighborhood violence, and drug dependence. We aim to create schools and classrooms that can meet the socioemotional and academic needs of not one or two children who have been exposed to traumatic levels of chronic stress, but the needs of a classroom of traumatized children.

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Even with the strongest lesson plan and best of intentions, off-task classroom behavior can undermine student learning. Such behaviors not only negatively impact students at the center of the interaction, but all students who find the behavior distracting or upsetting. As such, issues of classroom behaviors are at the top of most teacher's concerns.

Although most off-task behaviors are minor in nature, such as goofing-off or talking-out-of-turn, some can quickly escalate and become more serious. Externalizing behaviors such as classroom outbursts, verbal jabs, or even physical attacks not only derail instruction, but can compromise the physical and emotional safety of students and educators.

Though many educators believe that classroom outbursts occur unexpectedly, researchers have identified a predictable pattern of student behavioral escalation and effective strategies for identifying students who are at risk of having an emotional outburst. The acting out cycle provides a lens for understanding how student behavior escalates over time, leaving room for effective intervention.

We don't get to decide whether we have challenging students in our classes, but we can certainly decide how we respond to them.

-Carol Ann Tomlinson

Suggested Citation:

Hinton, E., Keels, M., Williams, S. (March, 2018). Understanding and Responding to the Acting Out Cycle. Practice Brief #6. TREP Project.

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THE LONG LEAD UP TO ACTING OUT

When thinking of the acting out cycle, it is helpful to think of a rider's ascent to the peak of a roller coaster. The emotion-fueled tipping point on the rollercoaster is typically what comes to mind first when teachers recall a particularly difficult experience of student behavior in the classroom. But what is often missing in this interpretation is the long climb to the peak; this progression is called **behavioral escalation**.

Part of the long lead up to chronic acting out behaviors is the way in which a child's characteristics (self-regulation, temperament, academic and verbal ability) interact with the school or classroom environment. Students who have frequent engagement with unsupportive environments can build a history of defeating experiences. Such difficulties with the demands of school compound overtime resulting in mutually reinforcing negative relationships between the child and subsequent teachers.

Alternatively, when teachers and schools can provide consistent, positive support to students, this cycle can be broken. Such work is done incrementally through the day-to-day interactions that students have with their teachers. When teachers understand and respond to classroom behavior in positive and proactive ways, students (even with histories of disruptive behavior) will begin to re-orient their relationships with teachers and with school.



In my world there are no bad kids, just impressionable, conflicted young people wrestling with emotions & impulses, trying to communicate their feelings and needs the only way they know how.

-Janet Lansbury

WHAT IS THE ACTING OUT CYCLE?

The acting out cycle outlines the progression of student externalizing behavior. Beginning with triggers that could have happened before school or during class. Triggers spark the initial agitation that can escalate into disruptive behaviors. The cycle demonstrates the gradual nature of student misbehavior. An understanding of the early stages of the acting out cycle help teachers to identify points of behavioral intervention before a full-on outburst occurs. This cycle is comprised of seven progressive phases.



More than understanding what the acting out cycle is, teachers should be prepared with an understanding of how best to intervene at each phase. Ineffective management of students exhibiting externalizing behaviors during instructional time can be one of the largest barriers to a positive, productive classroom environment. Although such instances can be a major source of frustration, being a trauma responsive educator involves creating a comprehensive behavioral management system that not only leverages school-wide resources and practices but establishes effective strategies for addressing student misbehavior in ways that support long-term educational goals. A crucial step to doing this is understanding how aggressive outbursts gradually unfold and how to proactively and responsively circumvent them.

Remember; everyone in the classroom has a story that leads to misbehavior or defiance. Nine times out of ten, the story behind the misbehavior won't make you angry, it will break your heart.

-Annette Breaux

PHASES OF THE ACTING OUT CYCLE

The acting out cycle is a gradual process with multiple phases, some of which are more visible than others. The chart below details both student behaviors and ideal teacher responses at each level of the cycle.

PHASES OF THE ACTING OUT CYCLE		
	Student Behaviors	Teacher Responses
CALM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideal classroom behavior • Engaged in instruction • Adhering to classroom social and behavioral expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide positive attention • Work on developing relationships with children • Provide safe, calm environment
TRIGGER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom stimulus (interpersonal conflict, cognitive frustration, social pressure) provokes a trauma response • Triggers can be social, cognitive, emotional or physiological 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin to recognize what triggers are and help to prevent them, • Change the setting, social interactions • Offer positive attention
AGITATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Off-task behaviors • Difficulty with concentration • Physical signs of agitation such as tapping, rocking, “spacing out” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redirect child • Change the way the child is working on the activity—offer choices • Provide assistance • Offer calming techniques
ACCELERATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student seeks teacher’s attention in negative ways • Inconsistent compliance with redirection • Attempts to provoke teacher and other students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calmly redirect to appropriate behavior • Acknowledge feelings • Make high-probability requests • Give positive attention • Do <u>not</u> engage in argument, use sarcasm, or offer negative remarks
PEAK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student escalates to out of control behavior • Displays of physical and/ or verbal aggression toward others • Can be potentially dangerous for others in the classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain safety • Stay calm • Help child to regain control in respectful, caring way
DE-ESCALATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student becomes disoriented or confused • Withdraws emotionally • Becomes more receptive to teacher redirection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move child to Quiet Corner • Provide calm independent activity • Check on rest of class to restore order • Request support from other adults and administrators when needed
RECOVERY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student calms down • May avoid talking about the incident 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debriefing of incident is critical • Discuss what triggered incident and make plan for prevention in future

RESPONDING TO THE ACTING OUT CYCLE

Calm Phase: Because student behavior in this stage is ideal, the most effective interventions will be proactive in nature. Establishing clear behavioral expectations, providing strong instruction and preparing specific behavioral plans for students with histories of challenging behavior all contribute to maintaining a classroom culture and environment that becomes less susceptible to behavioral escalation. Additionally, it is imperative that teachers provide students with a sufficient amount of monitoring and affirming attention when they are on-task. Educators need to provide both **contingent attention**—provided in response to specific student behaviors such as giving positive praise, and **non-contingent attention**—informal, interpersonal, relationship-building interactions between teachers and students.

Classroom Triggers: A classroom trigger is a spark that can ignite a student's progression toward an externalizing outburst. Intervening in this stage of the acting out cycle requires both preparation and on-the-spot problem solving. **Pre-correction plans** allow teachers to anticipate potential misbehaviors and provide students with guidance about how to avoid them. Pre-corrections catch and support students before they have the opportunity to violate expectations.

Agitation Phase: Student's entering the agitation phase will need more targeted supports to avoid further behavioral escalation. It is imperative that teachers stop the cycle at this point before more severe behavioral consequences occur. During this phase teachers must acknowledge to the student that they recognize the difficulty that they are having and provide instructional supports and/or behavioral accommodations to meet the student's needs. As part of a comprehensive behavior management plan, teachers should have pre-arranged classroom modifications such as a designated quiet area, a protocol for taking a brief instructional break, or acceptable movement activities.

Acceleration Phase: Even though the agitation phase is usually the longest, many teachers fail to notice student behavioral difficulties until they escalate further and enter the acceleration phase. This is because student behavior during this phase becomes deliberately disruptive and can often be directed at the teacher. To intervene during this stage, behavior management must be approached with **emotional neutrality**, understanding that student misbehavior is not a personal attack on authority, but rather a display of information that a trauma-impacted student is having difficulty meeting classroom expectations. This requires setting pride aside and allowing some minor misbehaviors to occur in order to avoid further escalation. Educators must be very careful to not exhibit **counter-aggression** in response to student behavior. During this phase, perhaps even more than others, it is crucial that students are provided with positive feedback in response to small successes in adhering to classroom expectations.

RESPONDING TO THE ACTING OUT CYCLE

Peak Phase: If a student reaches the peak phase of the acting out cycle, the primary goal of the teacher is to ensure the safety of all people in the classroom. A comprehensive behavioral management plan should include an outline of the school-wide protocol, or crisis plan, to be used in response to major student outbursts. Depending on available resources and personnel demands, schools should advise teachers in the most effective and safe ways to deal with worst case scenarios. Such interventions may include removing the student from the classroom, clearing other students out of the classroom, or involving the assistance of other staff.

De-escalation: Following the peak phase, students will begin their descent from emotional intensity and aggression. During de-escalation, the student is unlikely to be interested in discussing the incident and should be given time to process on their own. Placing a student in a calm corner of the room with a low-level independent task can give them time to cool off and collect themselves before engaging more directly with the teacher. This time should also be used to re-direct other students in the classroom so as to restore order as quickly and effectively as possible. It can also be helpful to briefly acknowledge the incident with the rest of the class and remind them of ways to ask for help if they are feeling overwhelmed and need a brief break.

Recovery: Following this, it is imperative that teachers **debrief** with the student at the center of the incident. This is a time for you to listen to the student's frustration and to brainstorm ways to avoid future outbursts. Collectively, a plan of action for improved future behavior should be made, which could potentially include an alteration to the student's individualized behavior management plan or a reminder of classroom protocols. Caring discipline must be utilized to hold students accountable. Clearly explain to the student what the consequences of their actions are and outline expectations for their future success in the classroom. **Debrief yourself**, think back over the student's behaviors that day and previous days so you get better at catching students during the trigger and agitation phases. Be honest with yourself about your role in the incident and be open about how your behavior could be improved in the future. Perhaps most importantly, the debriefing session must seek to create a healthier learning environment.

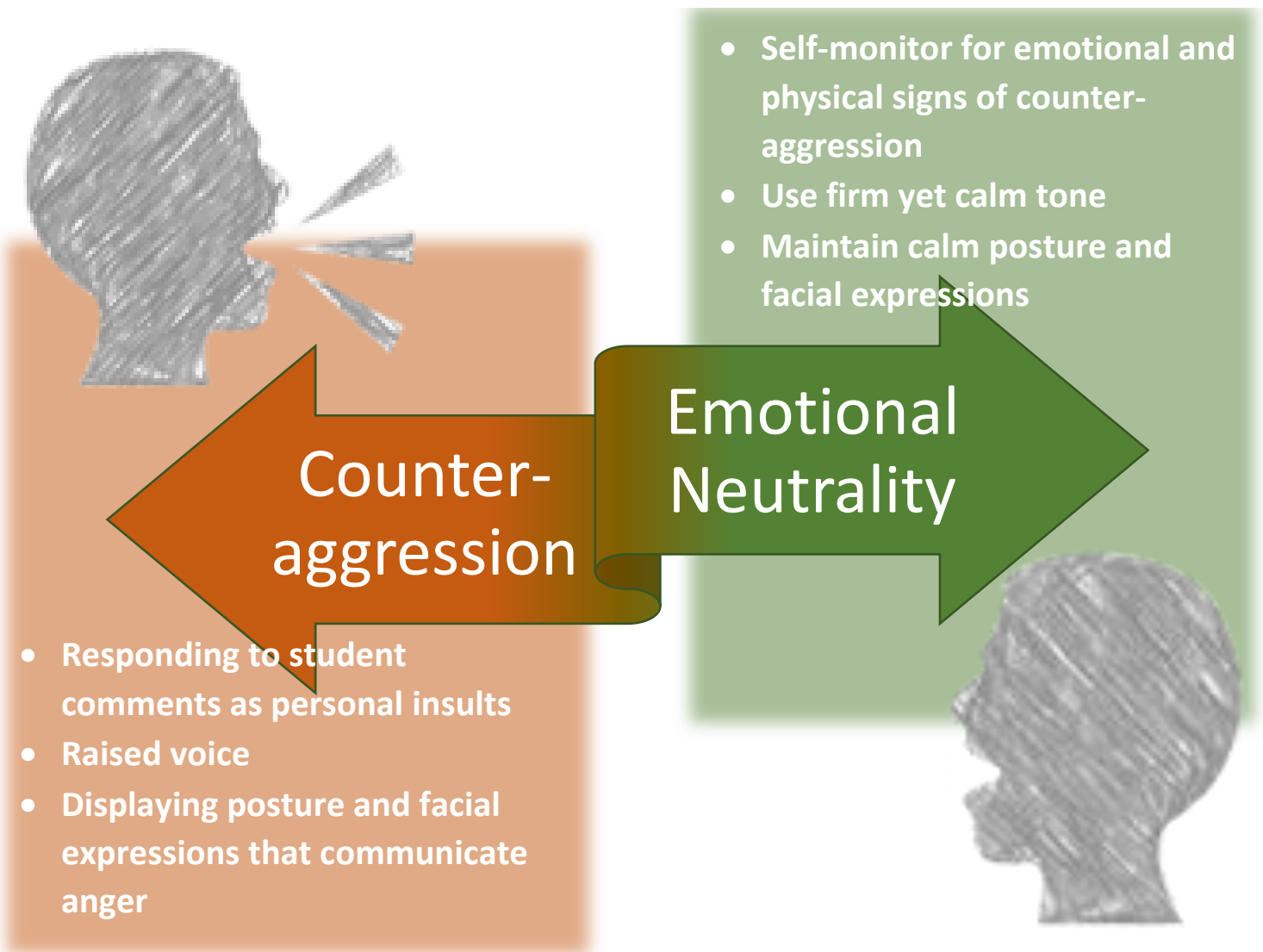
What our students need most is not negative consequences and zero tolerance policies. What our students need is absolutely consistent and urgent support around maintaining appropriate behavior.

-Billy Aydlett

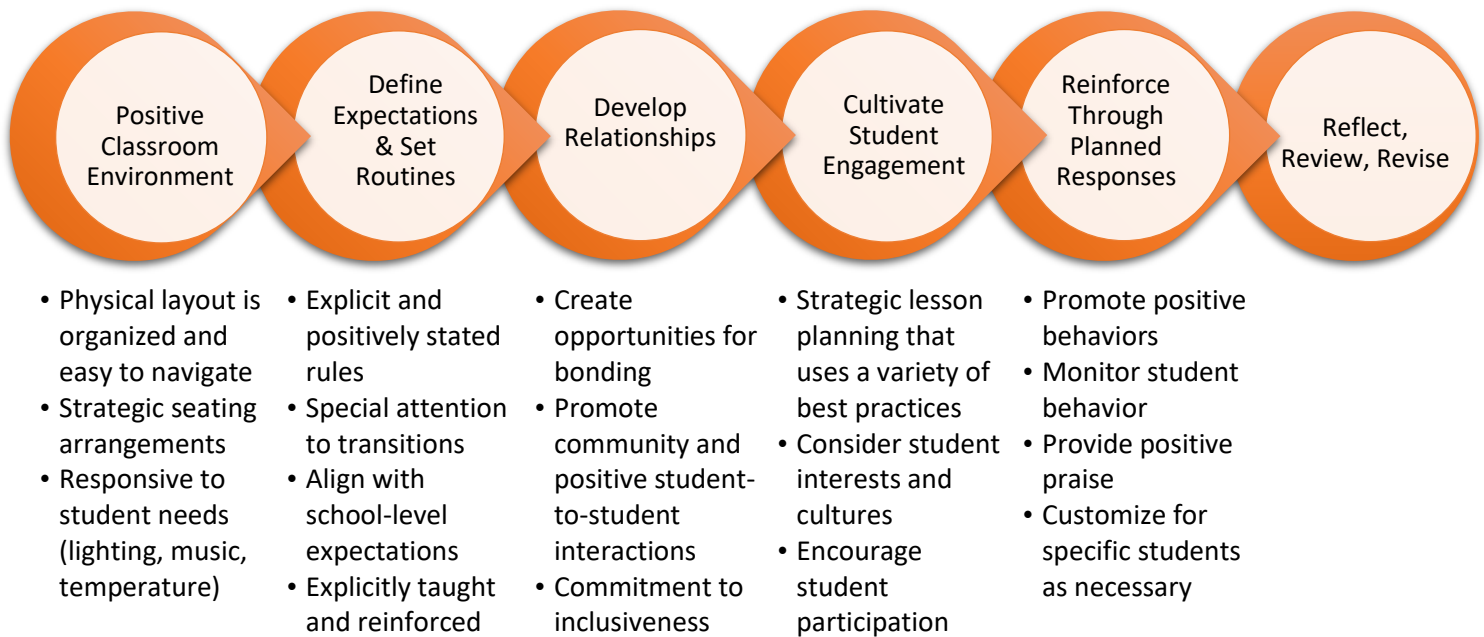
EMOTIONAL NEUTRALITY & COUNTER-AGGRESSION

Classroom behaviors do not happen in a vacuum; they are transactional. A student who yells across the classroom may provoke a teacher to raise their voice in response. A teacher who slams their hand on a chalkboard to get a student's attention might provoke a student to angrily protest. Disruptive student behavior has the potential to incite maladaptive teacher responses. Educators must be very deliberate about avoiding such occurrences of *counter-aggression*. Counter-aggression by teachers is not only unhelpful to de-escalation, but is detrimental to the development of a positive classroom environment.

To decrease the likelihood that a behavioral incident will escalate out of control, teachers must practice maintaining **emotional neutrality** in the face of student outbursts. Emotional neutrality is being aware of your emotions, particularly negative emotions, and being able to manage how much those emotions show in your interactions with students.



PLANNING FOR STUDENT BEHAVIORAL SUPPORT



A **comprehensive behavior management plan** outlines a teacher's vision, specific goals and strategies to be used to support positive student behavior throughout the school year. Creating a clear plan for student engagement helps teachers define their classroom expectations for their students and for themselves. In addition to an overall plan that should meet the needs of the majority of students in a class, teachers may also need to outline specific behavioral supports for students with histories of externalizing outbursts or other challenging behaviors. Such supports should be individualized and responsive to students' specific needs. As such, the plan should be a living document—strong enough to get students started on the right foot, yet flexible enough to change as students' needs change.

BECOMING COMFORTABLE WITH FLEXIBLE SEATING

One way to support students who need additional behavior support is to provide more choice in classroom seating options. Allowing flexibility in both furniture type and location can be beneficial to students in a number of ways:



1. Allows movement and physical activity which is developmentally necessary for many students to maintain focus for long periods of time.
2. Encourages personal responsibility and opportunities for self-regulation
3. By choosing seating that is most comfortable for them, students may exhibit improved mood and orientation toward learning.

Read [Flexible Seating Elevates Student Engagement](#) for more details.

LESSONS FROM THE CLASSROOM

Below a high school teacher reflects on her experiences with a student who was having difficulty meeting her classroom expectations. Notice how she explains her use of emotional neutrality and flexible seating to cultivate a safe, “home-like setting” in her classroom.

...On this particular day, a male student approximately 12 years old entered the room and I asked him to do something repeatedly, and he would not comply. Unfortunately, for the both of us, I responded in good ol’ “new urban teacher” manner-- I went off. I am sure I probably told him that, “he must have me confused with somebody else” and put him out of the class.

*He eventually came back to the room and we moved on. Later, I **began to watch his patterns of behavior** and realized that when his mother was sober, he was a model student and when she was not, he was lost, confused, and aggressive; **he was looking for control and stability.***

*If I had known better, I would have completely approached the situation differently. **One of my quick fixes would have been remaining in control of myself and not take his response as an attack on me.** I would have also taken him in a more private place, perhaps the hallway to talk. Since this exchange, I have come to embrace the idea that the classroom space should be like a home and belongs to both the teacher and the students...*

As a result, of changing and refining my philosophy, I have not only witnessed the growth of my students but that of myself...

*One of the first things I have done to create student control and stability is to **manage myself, and my responses to their inappropriate behaviors.** Many students feed off aggressive behavior and utilize that aggression as a stimulus, which only amplifies their inappropriate behaviors. I have learned that by remaining calm I am able to deescalate some of the most “trying” and stressful situations.*

*As of [late], one of my greatest wins has been the implementation of flexible seating. Not only has flexible seating benefited my own students in their ability to exercise their power of choice but other students as well. In a flexible seating space, the control is in the hands of the students. This style of seating yields itself to be a more home-like setting. Additionally, **students openly demonstrate their ability to make choices that are reflective of their individual needs.** It is undoubted, that creating comfortability opens the floodgates to learning and that has become one of my daily goals.*

Recently, I have introduced an art therapy station into my classroom environment. This space allows students to express how they are feeling, whether it be through writing, drawing, or coloring. I have also implemented the use of yoga in the classroom in order to aide students in acquiring sustained control through learning to manage and direct their energy in a positive direction.

*With the understanding that this space is not only mine, but also that of my students, **we work together to build a classroom philosophy, reviewing and refining it regularly.***

These additions to my practice (as well as being cognizant of the aromas and colors I use in the environment) have aided in my growth as an educator in an urban environment in the 21st Century.

Without doubt, the development of the philosophy that where one is comfortable, one is liberated has helped to push my creativity and broaden my lens in my pursuit to empower the leaders of tomorrow, turning their traumas into victories and testimonies.

Learning is Growing,

-Nicole Williams, urban school educator

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