



Strategies for De-escalation and Student Re-engagement

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.

TREPEducator.org

Teachers are not clairvoyant and do not know what highly stressful or traumatic experiences a student may have experienced before arriving to school. Additionally, students who are coping with chronic traumatic stressors of abuse and neglect often do not tell their teachers what is happening in their lives. However, they do show the behavioral symptoms of trauma, one of which is overreacting when mildly frustrated or exhibiting sudden emotional outbursts for which there is no obvious trigger.

When a student resists complying or has an aggressive response our emotional reaction can lead us to think that the most effective discipline is to respond with similar behavior. However, rarely does yelling back, using a harsh tone, or immediately sending them out of the room improve behavior. Instead, the student may continue to escalate the interaction by yelling back or getting physically aggressive. To avoid this feedback loop of escalating aggression, educators need to be equipped with a toolbox of de-escalation strategies that have been shown effective in addressing challenging student behavior.

Follow the story of Ms. Flowers, a 6th grade teacher in her first-year of teaching at an urban middle school in Chicago. Ms. Flowers had no formal training in trauma responsive practices or de-escalation, however, like many teachers in urban districts, she was faced with challenging behaviors stemming from trauma. Through her experiences with two boys in her class who had conflicts with each other outside of school, she learned the value of trauma responsive de-escalation.

Suggested Citation:

Tackie, H., Nixon, J., Keels, M. (February, 2018). Strategies for De-escalation and Student Re-engagement. Practice Brief #5. TREP Project.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

RATIONALIZING ESCALATION

RATIONALIZING
ESCALATION..... 2

PHYSIOLOGY OF AGITATION 3

DEPERSONALIZATION: IT’S
NOT ABOUT YOU 4

BENEFITS OF TRAMA
RESPONSIVE DEESCALATION 5

DEESCALATION: DOs AND
DON’Ts..... 6

DEESCALATION: WHAT TO
SAY 7

REENGAGEMENT 8

PROMOTING FEELINGS OF
SAFETY..... 9

REFERENCES 10

When students enter the classroom, they carry with them feelings and emotions from their earlier experiences. This ranges from feelings of frustration after a stressful experience at home, to anger after being approached by a bully on the walk to school, to embarrassment left over from an uncomfortable interaction with the previous teacher.

Because students coping with traumatic stressors have a narrow window of frustration tolerance, a mildly frustrating classroom experience or interaction that could be managed by the average student is overwhelming to the traumatized student, and results in a disproportionate emotional overreaction. Traumatized students may also be triggered by something happening in the classroom that reminds them of a traumatic experience, such as a teacher touching the sensitive shoulder of a student who has experienced abuse. Often, because traumatized students also have poor self-regulation, emotional overreactions or outbursts can quickly escalate into aggressive peer-to-peer or teacher-student interactions.

Children whose stress system has been repeatedly activated internally resets to a higher baseline state of arousal. Consequently, even when there is no external threat or demand, they are physiologically in a state of alarm, ready to “fight or flight.” When a momentary stressor arises from their interactions with peers or teachers, or from demanding coursework, their physiological stress/fear systems can quickly escalate. A situation that might slightly and briefly agitate an average student, may cause traumatized students to react with “self-protective” aggression.

“One of my students who was in fights a lot stood up in the middle of a lesson one day took his shirt off, and I was like we’re in school right now so I’m not sure why you are taking your shirt off. He was like cause I’m going to flight. I was completely shocked. I had him removed from the classroom because that was really threatening the safety of other people.”

PHYSIOLOGY OF AGITATION

Whenever an outward emotional response is observed, a physiological response inside the brain and body are also taking place. The Arousal Continuum illustrates the relationships between the parts of the brain with the most intense level of activity and corresponding observed behaviors.

Arousal Continuum					
Parts of the brain activated	F-Cortex & Cortex	Cortex & Limbic	Limbic & Midbrain	Midbrain & Brainstem	Brainstem & Autonomic
Type of brain	Thinking brain	Thinking & emotional brain	Emotional brain	Emotional & survival brain	Survival brain
Observed behavior	Relaxed	Vigilance	Resistance	Defiance	Aggression
Thinking style	Conceptual Abstract	Concrete	Emotional	Reactive	Reflexive
Internal state	Calm	Aroused	Alarm	Fear	Terror

Adapted from ChildTrauma.org

Children who experience a chronic loss of safety develop altered neurophysiological processes that keeps them in a constant state of alarm which can easily move to fear or terror. In this agitated state, activation of the frontal cortex is suppressed and thus students may not be able to easily access higher order functions. This means that it is unproductive to have critical conversations or give complex instructions while students are in the midst of an emotional outburst or escalating interaction. It is important to remember that adults also experience the arousal continuum and may find it challenging to respond appropriately because they too are agitated.

“My school had a very prescriptive classroom management protocol. Basically, if there is a slight disturbance, like Jamie whose younger sister was threatened with a gun, would just call out a lot in class or act out. He would stand up and scream something that had nothing to do with what we are talking about in class.

So, I was instructed to say, ‘please sit down’. And then if he does it again then I’d have to say, ‘please sit down or some consequence will happen’, and ‘then please sit down now you have a warning.’ Each time the consequence he received would be greater. So that would be how we would deal with that particular child.”

DEPERSONALIZATION: IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU

LEARN THEIR TRIGGERS

Taking the time to notice what triggers students who have a pattern of escalating behavior is also useful. Triggers can include loud noises, being touched, hand or body gestures that are perceived as threatening, and anniversaries of tragic events

It is impossible to account for and control all possible triggers; however, it is possible to respond in ways that minimize re-traumatization, teaches expected behaviors, and acknowledge students' emotional state. It is also unrealistic to expect traumatized students to "tell" us when they are agitated unless we teach them how to identify, name, and communicate their emotional states.

Ideally, de-escalation begins before the emotional outburst occurs. Most often, students will display signs that they are agitated such as balling up their fists, fidgeting, clenching their jaw, or changes in the tone of their voice. Many educators ignore early signs of increasing agitation with the hope that if ignored the student will calm down. However, when ignored these minor behaviors, or signals of agitation, often escalate as the student becomes more frustrated.

In order to make disciplinary responses more trauma responsive, it is helpful to reframe student aggression as a result of either difficulty with emotional regulation or as an attempt to satisfy an unmet need. Outbursts and disruptive behavior are rarely solely attempts to annoy or personally attack you. Viewing student's behavior from this perspective will make it easier for you to depersonalize the interaction and remain calm. Depersonalization provides the emotional and cognitive space to assess the situation and respond accordingly.

While emotional neutrality is essential to de-escalate student behavior, it is not easy. Emotional neutrality asks you to stay calm and minimize the outward display of your internal emotional response. Mindfulness practices, which can help you be more aware of your own personal state will aid you in remaining emotionally neutral and depersonalizing. For information and tips on mindfulness, read our brief on [Maintaining Educator Well-Being](#).

"The idea was that you would give positive reward for the students who were following expectations and continue to escalate the consequences for students who were not. But then you weren't supposed to send them out of the classroom. They would literally act out until you sent them out. They'd be like, 'you can give me seventeen demerit marks and do whatever it is you want to do. You can write all this down because I know that if I keep this up I'm going to get out the class.'

BENEFITS OF TRAMA RESPONSIVE DEESCALATION

Benefits for the Classroom Community

- De-escalation serves as a lesson for all students in the classroom. Being witness to an interaction where a teacher listens to and responds to the needs of a fellow student builds trust and a feeling of safety throughout the entire classroom community.

Benefits for the Educator

- De-escalation can improve an educator's overall effectiveness, minimize their workload, and promote personal well-being. In the short term, teachers do not have to take part in the additional work that comes with filing a referral or requesting a suspension. By building trust, teaching expected behaviors, and establishing an emotionally supportive classroom with their students, teachers will be able to spend less time on classroom management. Depersonalization as a skill is also important to maintaining well-being.

Benefits for the Student

- De-escalation helps build relationships between teachers and students. When done well, students will feel heard and respected. They may also come away from the experience having learned behaviors that they can perform when feeling agitated in the future.
- When de-escalation is successful, students stay in the classroom and are kept out of a punitive cycle that may decrease their feeling of school belonging. Additionally, successful de-escalation makes space for students to be re-engaged in instruction.

“Obviously, these students struggle because they're never in the classroom to actually learn, which is a big problem, and administration obviously pushes to keep them in the classroom. You can't take them out because academically that's really bad for them, at the same time if they were misbehaving in the classroom that's not good for them either. For Jamie, when it came time to take the end of year standardized test he just shut down, he didn't take the test. That obviously that has bigger implications for where he's going to be able to go for high school.”

DEESCALATION: DOs AND DON'Ts

When de-escalating an agitated student, it is important that you carefully consider what you say and how you say it before, during, and after the interaction.

Do use short and simple language. Traumatized students have difficulty processing complex instructions when in an aroused state; therefore, keep your instructions clear and concise. Repetition can also be useful. Remaining calm will also help ensure instructions are given clearly and without sounding threatening.

Do ask questions. It is important to attempt to identify why a student is acting out and what can be done to calm them; ask questions to try and identify what needs the student is trying to meet as well as what they are feeling. Traumatized students may have trouble identifying or expressing their feelings and emotions, so using prompts is helpful.

Do set limits and reiterate rules. While directives or ultimatums, like “you better sit down or else you’re going to the office,” are to be avoided, set some limits in order to move the conversation forward and inform students what is required of them. For example, “We can talk, but only if you stop swearing.”

Do offer choices. Directives and ultimatums do not make students feel heard and may be belittling. Instead, affirm student’s autonomy by allowing them to choose from acceptable options. Feeling respected will often improve a student’s mood and feelings of belonging.

Do get on the same page. Recapping throughout the conversation shows the student that you are listening carefully and want to make sure you are both hearing each other. You can follow up a recap by asking the student if they agree with your interpretation.

Do be fair. Intervention should be balanced to the student’s outbursts; consequences should be matched with the student’s behavior.

Don’t be provocative. Keep a calm and level voice even when being disrespected, and never humiliate or challenge a student that appears agitated. Raising your voice or becoming aggressive teaches students that this type of behavior is acceptable, and screaming matches teach that they have control because they can affect your behavior.

Don’t argue. Rather than being combative or defensive, you should either agree or agree to disagree. This tactic not only shows students that they are being listened to but is empowering as the student feels they are being understood and that they are being engaged with as an equal.

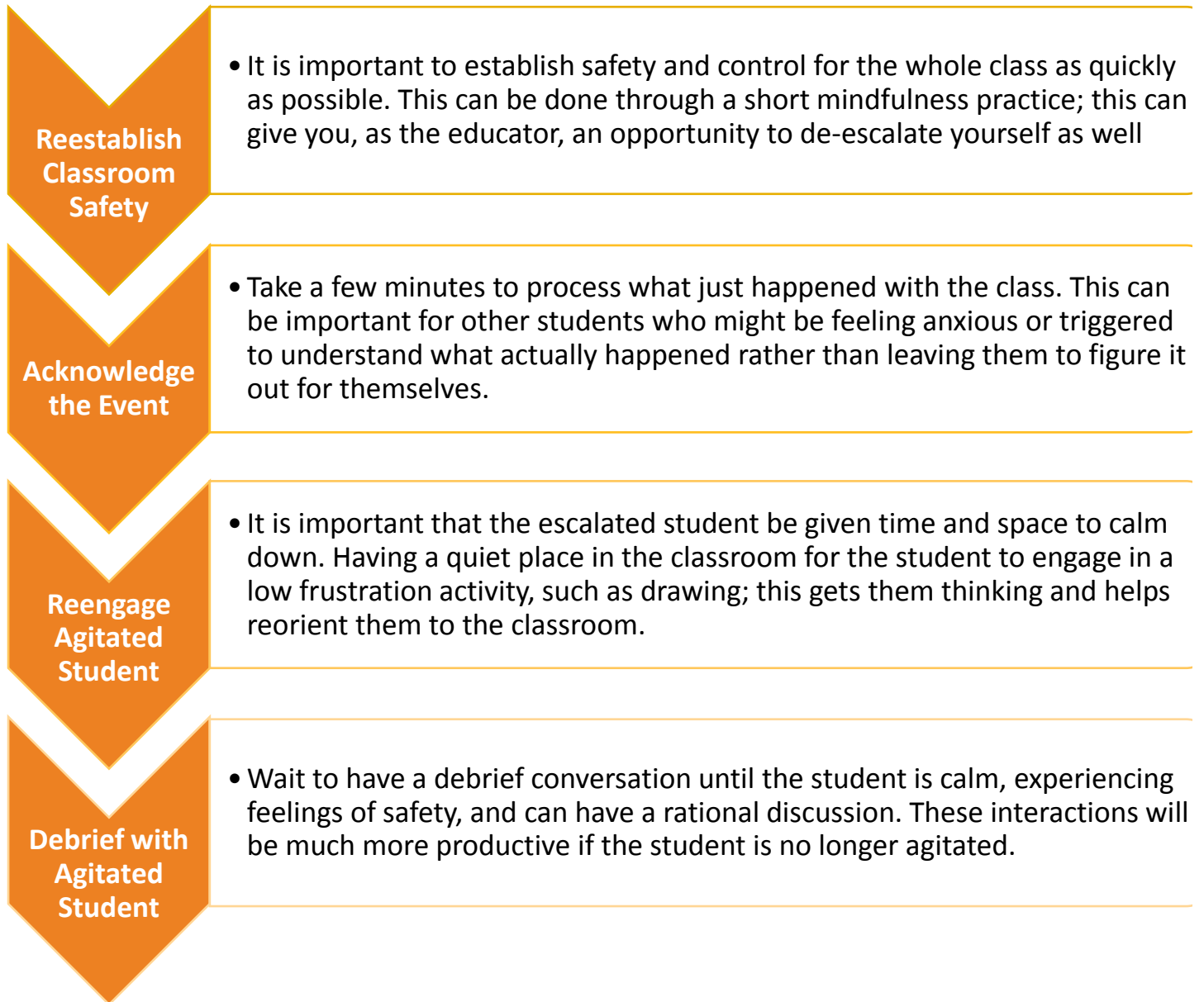
DEESCALATION: WHAT TO SAY

One small but effective aspect of the [Satori Alternative to Managing Aggression \(SAMA\)](#) is the script below. This script makes clear that a critical element of de-escalation is ensuring that the adult understands how the student is feeling and that the student feels they have been heard.

SAMA De-Escalation Script

I see you are (describe behavior).	Identify the behavior that signals to you the student is emotionally escalated.
Are you feeling (emotion)?	Inquire if you interpret the observed behavior correctly.
I can see that you are (emotion).	Affirm what the student says.
What are you (emotion) about?	Inquire why the student is feeling that way.
So, you're (emotion) about _____. Is that right?	Restate what you heard to verify your understanding and demonstrate that you're listening.
What do you want?	Assist the student in identifying what options are reasonably available.
What have you tried? What did you do?	Guide the student through a process of self-reflection.
How well has that worked?	Help the student assess their progress in dealing with the situation.
What else are you willing to try? Would you like to hear my ideas? You could try _____ or _____.	Provide alternatives if the student is struggling with identifying other ways to deal—the student chooses the next step.
Will you let me know how it goes?	Follow up with the student within an appropriate amount of time, this will help build trust.

REENGAGEMENT



“Since leaving my first school, I’ve done my own professional reading on restorative justice based on my experiences, and have tried using some of that language, and talking with students in that way it’s just night and day from what I was doing my first year in the classroom. Consequence, consequence, consequence; it was always what you did wrong and this is your consequence. I knew how I was being asked to react to student behavior wasn’t working but now I realize I was escalating students. Now when I talk to agitated students, I ask what went wrong and how can we fix this together. Finding out what the problem is and really helping them start to think it through.”

PROMOTING FEELINGS OF SAFETY

Often when we talk about de-escalation, we are discussing responding to a crisis situation. However, there are also important **preventative de-escalation** strategies that can be used any time a student starts to show agitated behavior.

Hang a poster of 5-7 things they can do to do to cool down. Students can choose which activity they would like to do. Some suggested activities are

- ✓ Counting backwards
- ✓ Deep breathing
- ✓ Getting water
- ✓ Removing self from situation
- ✓ Journaling/drawing/calming activity

Create a space in the classroom that allows students to remove themselves from over stimulation so that they can calm themselves while still attending to the lesson. This might look like having a separate desk or beanbag away from others. Designating a calming space also enables students to signal to you that they need to have a conversation without interrupting instruction.

Preventative de-escalation also includes activities that show students you respect them, they are welcome in the class, and they have input on their experiences in the classroom:

- ✓ Provide opportunities for student feedback on the classroom such as a suggestion box
- ✓ Create classroom rules together
- ✓ Ask them their opinions on something
- ✓ Encourage them to answer each other's questions

Debriefing Ms. Flower's Experiences

1. *What were the signs of trauma in Ms. Flowers' classroom?*
2. *What challenges did Ms. Flowers face?*
3. *Based on what you read in the brief, how could Ms. Flowers have de-escalated her student who had removed his shirt?*
4. *What are your expectations in terms of student compliance? When do your students respond to you best?*
5. *How do you imagine your class dynamic would change if you implemented some of the de-escalation strategies?*

REFERENCES

Fenning, P., Theodos, J., Benner, C., & Bohanon-Edmonson, H. (2004). Integrating proactive discipline practices into codes of conduct. *Journal of School Violence*, 3(1), 45-61.

Infante, D. A. (1995). Teaching students to understand and control verbal aggression. *Communication Education*, 44(1), 51-63.

Larson, J. (2008). Angry and aggressive students. *The Education Digest*, 73(7), 48.

Mendler, A. N., & Mendler, B. D. (2011). *Power Struggles: Successful Techniques For Educators*. Solution Tree Press.

Perry, B. D., Pollard, R. A., Blakley, T. L., Baker, W. L., & Vigilante, D. (1995). Childhood trauma, the neurobiology of adaptation, and use dependent development of the brain: How states become traits. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 16(4), 271-291.

Price, O., & Baker, J. (2012). Key components of de-escalation techniques: A thematic synthesis. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 21(4), 310-319.

Richmond, J., Berlin, J., Fishkind, A., Holloman, G., Zeller, S., Wilson, M., et al. (2012). Verbal De-escalation of the Agitated Patient: Consensus Statement of the American Association for Emergency Psychiatry Project BETA De-escalation Workgroup. *Western Journal of Emergency Medicine*, 13(1), 17-25.

Shelby County Schools PBIS and Student Leadership Team. (, July 16, 2015) De-escalation Strategies: Keeping Behavior from Going BOOM!: Incorporating techniques that work with Love and Logic. Shelby County Schools.