

Fact sheet

Prevention and De-escalation of Risk Behaviour

Introduction

All state school staff should receive training in the use of evidence based positive behaviour support, proactive strategies for supporting students, and preventative de-escalation practices in order to minimise and, as far as possible, eliminate the use of restrictive practices. In Queensland, the preferred model of positive behaviour support employed is [Positive Behaviour for Learning \(PBL\)](#).

De-escalation is a collective term for a range of staff interventions, comprising verbal and non-verbal communication, self-regulation, assessment, and actions, whilst maintaining the safety of staff and students (adapted from Hallet & Dickens 2017).

The strategies outlined in this fact sheet are general approaches; all schools have a [Student Code of Conduct](#) which explains the school's adopted approaches for responding to student behaviour. An [Individual Behaviour Support Plan](#) (IBSP) should be developed for students requiring ongoing, intensive support, as these plans incorporate strategies that promote positive and proactive approaches for responding to the student's behaviour, and will be based upon a functional behaviour assessment (FBA). Students identified with high risk behaviours which pose a serious risk of injury to themselves or others will require an [Individual Student Safety Plan](#) (ISSP) if restrictive practices are employed as part of a planned risk management approach.

This fact sheet will discuss the prevention of behavioural escalation, the stages of behavioural escalation, interventions that may work to de-escalate a risk situation, and crisis management with the aim of reducing the situational and behavioural risk.

Preventative strategies

So far as possible, staff will adopt preventative strategies to avoid behaviour escalating. When specific behavioural risk has been identified, it is important to adopt evidence-based, positive, proactive and preventive strategies as part of a student's behaviour support plan. A student behaviour support plan must account for the specific needs of the student, and in emergency situations, it is also important to consider the factors impacting that student. This is not an exhaustive list, but preventative actions include:

- building effective relationships with parents and using their knowledge to provide effective support for students
- building positive relationships with students e.g. taking an interest in them and their situation, greeting students and asking questions about them
- explicitly explaining, teaching and prompting expected behaviours and procedures. Being clear about boundaries and rules in and around the school and classroom
- providing high rates of acknowledgement to all students. Looking for opportunities to acknowledge students who might be most at risk of exhibiting risk behaviours
- getting to know students and their personal signs of distress
- identifying times or situations that may be potentially stressful or difficult for individual students
- providing tasks and activities that are at the correct level for all students, and differentiating work when it is appropriate
- providing opportunities for active engagement of students who seek to avoid certain situations, tasks or activities

- intervening early at the first signs of stress, distress or agitation
- actively supervising classroom and non-classroom areas for potential areas of conflict. If necessary, making environmental changes to accommodate the issues
- demonstrating a supportive approach through facial expressions and body language
- responding flexibly by adapting to the specific situational factors that may increase behavioural risk
- speaking calmly and clearly, even when a risk situation is emerging
- providing students with reasonable options; be prepared to compromise, not giving in to unreasonable expectations, but working in a solution focused way
- using active listening techniques
- addressing issues quickly and individually. Talking to students aside from their peers or other people, when it is possible
- being sincere in your communications with students
- sharing information in a professional and appropriate way with colleagues e.g. consideration for confidentiality of students.

Understanding behavioural escalation

Behaviour escalates when a range of responses occurs in a sequential pattern in which successive responses are of increased severity or intensity (Shukla-Mehta, 2002).

Colvin and Sugai (2005, 2018) suggest that there are seven stages of behavioural escalation:

1. CALM

The student is calm and cooperative.

2. TRIGGER

The student experiences conflicts or situations that trigger their behaviour to escalate. These may be internal or external triggers.

3. AGITATION

The student loses focus and they are more visibly upset. They might challenge authority or avoid situational factors they find stressful.

4. ACCELERATION

If the conflict continues to be unresolved, the behaviour of the student will escalate and may become more intense. The student will lose focus and find it very hard to engage in rational discussion.

5. PEAK

The student will not be in control of their emotions or behaviour and will likely exhibit observable risk behaviour for example self-injury, shouting, swearing or destroying furniture.

6. DE-ESCALATION

The student will start to calm and a drop in the intensity of the expressed emotion will be visible.

7. RECOVERY

The student's behaviour drops to their usual baseline or even below that and they appear calmer. They may express regret or fear; some students have difficulty expressing their emotions when in this phase.

The following table (Colvin & Sugai 2005, 2018) outlines some general prevention and de-escalation skills for each phase of the cycle of escalation. It is important to remember that specific skills need to be tailored for individual students, based on an individual behaviour support plan (IBSP) developed from a functional behaviour assessment (FBA).

PHASE	FOCUS	STRATEGIES (Examples)
CALM	<i>Reinforce calm and on-task behaviour (included in IBSP)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish expectations • Teach procedures and routines • Use high rates of positive acknowledgement
TRIGGER	<i>Prevent and redirect (included in IBSP)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modify the environment • Change the task/distract • Provide support with the task
AGITATION	<i>Reduce anxiety</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employ active listening • Use empathy • Provide reassurance • Reduce or remove demands
ACCELERATION	<i>Focus on safety/space and disengagement</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give brief verbal redirection • Allow processing time/wait • Provide physical space • Move others away
PEAK	<i>Monitor and ensure safety</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As above • Minimise verbal interaction • Take evasive action if necessary
DE-ESCALATION	<i>Minimal attention</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak calmly • Acknowledge student's feelings • Emphasise fresh start
RECOVERY	<i>Re-establish routines and activities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce appropriate behaviour • Restitution • Offer support when calm
DEBRIEF	<i>Transition back to usual routine</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasise learning • Teach alternative behaviour • Provide practice opportunities for desired behaviour(s)

De-escalation strategies

De-escalation is a skill that can be learnt, but it is important to use the right strategy, at the right time, for the right student. What works for one student may not work for another. Understanding what works and why is important if the de-escalation strategy is going to be successful. Strategies you might employ include:

- **Acknowledging the student:** validate the student's emotions, confirm to them that it is legitimate to feel upset, angry, exhausted or betrayed. Respond to the emotion they are expressing and not the emotional intensity.
- **Agree with the student:** if it is possible to do so. Find some truth in what is being said or expressed by the student. This reduces the conflict and can assist in being solution focused, preventing escalation. This doesn't mean giving in, or accepting that everything they say is valid, it is about finding **some** truth in what they are expressing; it is simply a way to move towards resolution and avoid conflict in the short term. Once the conflict is over and the immediate risk has been managed, it is possible to find time to explore the situation as a whole.
- **Use clarification:** if a student is very upset it can be difficult for them to express what they are saying meaningfully. Using statements to help clarify meaning, rather than assume what the student means can be helpful in de-escalating e.g. 'Are you saying that you feel angry towards Billy?' 'Do you mean you feel like you want to hurt yourself?' 'Are you telling me you feel lonely?'. By ensuring you understand what the student is expressing, you will be better able to provide an appropriate response and de-escalate the situation.
- **Offering choices, options and boundaries:** this means defining what the options are and identifying the possible natural consequences for the student, dependent on the decisions they make. This is not the same as using a threat and should not be presented as a threat. Do not use statements that include potential or known triggers for the student. As a situation escalates it can be very effective to offer options, for example:

'Stay here and we can try and work something out together. We need to keep you safe. If you leave we won't know where you are. If you leave, I will have to report this to the principal and they may call your parents.'

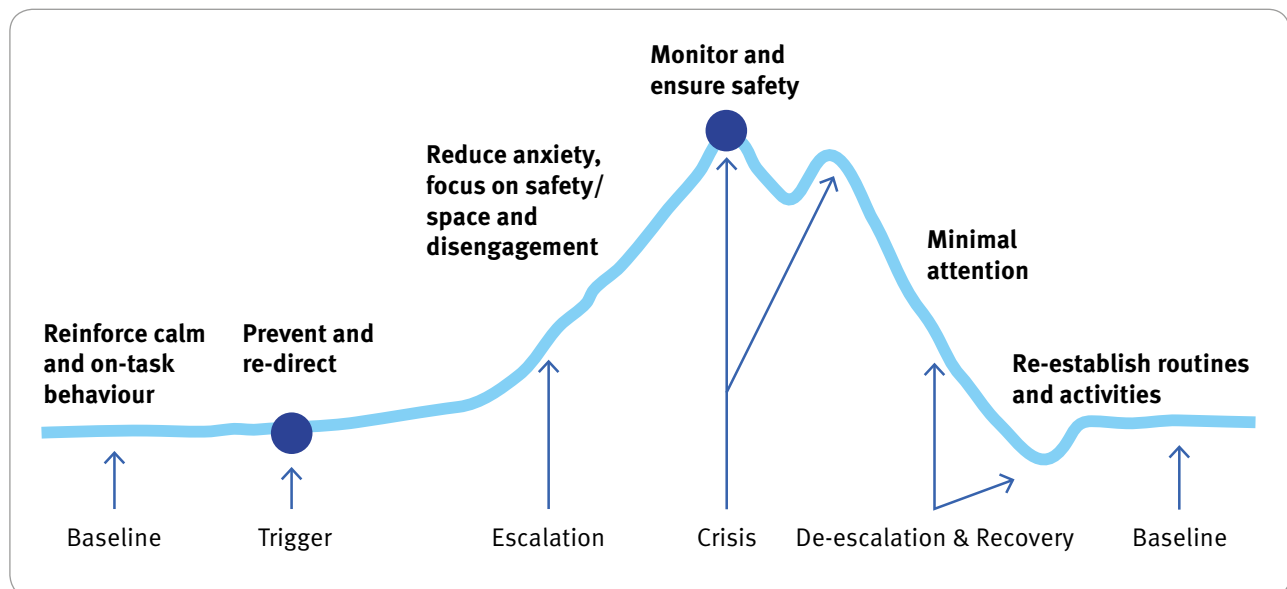
'I understand that you have left your homework at home. Shouting at me is not being respectful. When you stop shouting we can discuss what we can do to help you remember.'
- **Distract the student:** for example change topic, make a noise, drop some books, and ask a question about something you know is of interest to the student. Use a strategy that interrupts the situation and diverts attention of the student to something else, ask for the student to help with something. Distraction can be a very effective short term solution for preventing escalation of a situation.

In terms of using de-escalation strategies effectively, it is important to consider your communication style. This includes not just what you say, but how you say it and your accompanying body language.

Checklist reminders for de-escalation

- ✓ Remain calm and use measured voice, volume and tone.
- ✓ Monitor your own body language and ensure it is non-confrontational.
- ✓ Communicate respect and a desire to help.
- ✓ Acknowledge the student's feelings, "I can see you are upset".
- ✓ Keep verbal interactions brief, calm and respectful.
- ✓ Avoid power struggles, it is not about who wins the argument.
- ✓ Give the student space.
- ✓ Move other students and the audience away.
- ✓ Allow the student to move away, if safe to do so.
- ✓ Calmly provide a direction that you know the student is more likely to comply with.
- ✓ Allow processing time for the student when you give instructions.
- ✓ If escalation occurs, move further away if possible and make the area as safe as possible.
- ✓ Make sure you have an exit plan, so you can safely leave the situation if necessary.
- ✓ Send for help if necessary.

When to use specific approaches



Source: adapted from Colvin & Sugai, 2005, 2018, Kaplan & Wheeler 1983

Checklist for managing continued escalation and crisis

- ✓ When planning support, staff must recognise and agree upon an observable and measurable description for each of the phases of behavioural escalation.
- ✓ Whenever practical, respond at the first indication that the problem behaviour has been triggered; failure to do so will likely result in an increase in the speed of escalation in successive future episodes.
- ✓ Where appropriate, there should be an agreed and documented intervention for each of the phases.
- ✓ When escalation occurs it will likely continue until the peak or crisis is reached. It is at this stage that the safety of the student, staff and/or others is paramount.
- ✓ When the behaviour is at the peak/crisis, it may be that as a last resort, if presented with immediate risk to the student, the use of a restrictive practice might be necessary.
- ✓ Staff should receive training in evidence based proactive responses e.g. positive behaviour for learning.
- ✓ If there is a known risk that staff may need to use a restrictive practice as part of a planned response, they should have training in the use of the restrictive practice.
- ✓ On occasions it may be necessary to seek external assistance, for example, Queensland Police Service or Queensland Ambulance Service. Ensure that staff know the procedure for requesting external assistance.

References

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