

Keep it Cool

Keeping cool is the key to handling crisis situation in the school situation. Also being able to recognize where a student is on the crisis continuum and what strategies will work successfully will aid you as, the adult in the situation , in dealing with disruptive behaviors as they occur.

All behavior goes through a series of stages. The continuum looks like this:

Normal –	anxiety –	defensive –	acting out –	Tension reduction
Behavior	level	level	level	Level

How we deal with students in each stage is important. Keeping cool, also known as rational detachment is even more important.

Rational detachment

It is very important in a crisis situation for the adult to stay in control of his/her own behavior and not take a student's acting out behavior personally. As the adult in the situation, it is important not to overreact or respond inappropriately to the child and his/her behavior. Remaining calm, not getting involved in shouting matches or arguing back and forth helps to depersonalize the situation. This also keeps the adult from becoming locked in a power struggle with the student. Many students are extremely skilled in behavior which draws the adult into the power struggle situation. Responding to behaviors with a calm consistency sends a message to students. Predictable behavior on the teacher's part over time lets students know you will always be the same. They come to accept that and deal with the problems and the consequences rather than getting into a personality battle with the adult.

The sequence in the crisis continuum begins with anxiety which is defined as a noticeable change in an individual's normal behavior.

What are some factors that maybe putting students in this stage of anxiety? What things are happening in their lives that are making them more likely to act out in anger?

- Loss of personal power – the student feels unable to handle things in their own way or that someone else is taking away their power to handle thing on their own.
- Trying to maintain self-esteem – the student tries to cover up feelings about him/her self that they don't feel comfortable with.
- Fear – the student is afraid of something
- Academic anxiety – the student perceives he or she is not succeeding in school
- Craving attention – something is missing in the student's life
- Displaced anger – what happened at home or in the neighborhood often is reflected in feelings of anxiety students bring feelings from home situations and vent feelings in the school situation
- Psychological/physiological causes – student may not be feeling well or may come to school hungry
- Cultural organization – in many family situations, disorganizations, lack of structured time and general chaos are the norm, students are constantly in a state of anxiety

How can we as teacher respond at this level?

1. Be supportive – use emphatic listening to let the child know his/her problems are part of being human and are experienced by other children as well as adults. Some examples of emphatic listening: I know this is hard for you, everyone has problems that need to work on, I can see that you are feeling sad, I can tell that something is bothering you”.
2. Think – where is this anxiety coming from? Is there some way I can diminish this anxiety for this student?
3. How you react non-verbally can help reduce the student’s anxiety level: Give the student personal space – sitting next to the student is less threatening to them than facing them head on. If the student is standing, stoop down to their level so you can give them the feeling of equality in the situation. Leave space for the student to retreat, never block them into a corner. Anxious students do not like you to touch them. Watch your body language. Students read a lot into position of arms and facial expressions.
4. How you react verbally can help reduce the student’s anxiety level. How you say what you say can have an effect in escalating or reducing a student’s anxiety level. Keep calm, quiet tone of voice. The rate and rhythm of your voice sends messages to the anxious student. In many cultures it is not appropriate for a child to look at the adult who is speaking to them. As teachers, we often expect students to look at us when we are speaking to them. Learning not to demand this of the anxious student may help reduce the conflict.

The second stage in the crisis continuum is called the Defensive stage. The student at this level becomes confrontational. The student begins to lose the process of rational thought. The following list describes the characteristics of a student in the defensive stage. The student may be exhibiting one or more of these behaviors.

- Intensive emotional reaction (shouting, crying, etc.)
- Lack of perspective (it’s all the other person’s fault)
- Student may be unable or refuse to discuss ways of solving the problem. The student may ignore you and not respond to direct questioning.
- Physical reaction (hitting, pushing, etc)
- Impulsive behavior (running away)

What can you as the teacher do to respond to a student who is in this defensive stage and is beginning to lose control? What strategies can you use to de-escalate the student’s behavior?

- Calmly state your expectations and set your limits
- Give the student the power to make a choice and deal with the logical consequences
- Give two options to the student so they can make a choice.
- State a positive choice first. (Example: I need you to pay attention. Would you like to join us or....)
- State the negative option (do you choose to leave us and do to the time-out room?)
- Speak in a calm relaxed voice. Keep your voice down and show no affect. Be matter-of-fact, polite and respectful. Keep your body relaxed, don’t disagree, argue, command or demand.
- Give the student some wait time to think about the choices. Be patient and don’t give up. Time is on your side. Then calmly repeat the options. If the student challenges instead of complying, restate the options in a calm tone of voice.

The next stage of the crisis continuum is the acting out stage. The student is totally out of control at this point. It is usually necessary to remove the student from the room at this point.

- If the student is acting out verbally, respond verbally. Ask them to leave the room, escort them to the door if necessary.
- If the student is acting out physically, respond physically.
- Respond physically only to defend yourself. Don't use physical force to drag a student. If a student is pulling away from you go only in the direction the student is going. Do not try to restrain a student who is physically acting out from leaving the room. Let the student go and summon help.

In the tension reduction state, the student is regaining the process of rational thought. The student is coming calmer, negative energies are subsiding. The student may be more open to dealing with the conflict in a peaceful manner. At this point it is important for the teacher to reestablish a positive relationship with the student. Reopen lines of communication between teacher and student. Both teacher and student have had time to think through the situation. Student eventually should be able to reenter the classroom

Three steps to Avoiding Power Struggles

1. Ask the student:

- Can you..... (This gives the student power)
- ...let me tell you what to do?
- ...do this work?
- ...sit in your seat?
- ...be quiet?
- even through you ...
- ...are so angry and upset?
- ...don't want to?

If the student answers, "Yes" and is compliant, the conflict is over.

2. If the student answers, "No!" respond, "Then this will not be a safe place for you to stay. You will only get in trouble. You will need to go to a safe place until you can (follow my directions, do this work, etc)." (a predetermined safe place or the principal's office can be used)
3. Of the student answers, "Yes," but doesn't comply, "listen" to the child's behavior as if he had answered, "No"

Verbal Intervention

Do's

Remain clam
Listen
Isolate the situation
Set limits
Use logical consequences
Be aware of non-verbal communication
Keep in mind care, welfare, safety and security for all involved

Don'ts

overreact
Fact Attention
Have an audience
Give ultimatums
Make false promises
Get in a power struggle
Be threatened
Use jargon, it tends to confuse and frustrate