

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Strategies for Working with Emotionally Unpredictable Students

Introduction

Emotionally unpredictable students can often be very difficult to work with as an educator. They can have many different issues impinging on their lives and can exhibit a wide array of behaviors. Teaching them involves the use of effective strategies. The focus of this issue of *The Practical Teacher* will be to examine strategies to use when working with emotionally unpredictable students.

Stage 1:Frustration

Warning Signs: The student may...

- bite nails or lips
- grimace
- mutter or grumble
- appear flushed or tense
- seem 'stuck' on a topic or issue

Strategies to prevent or reduce the intensity of student frustration:

- Antiseptic bounce: Send the student from the room on an errand or task
- Permit student to go to quiet spot within or outside of classroom on 'respite break' (brief cool-down period)
- Teach the student appropriate ways to seek help when stuck on academic assignment
- Spend 5 minutes talking through issue with student (or send student to another caring adult)
- Give student an 'IOU' to meet with adult to talk over issue at more convenient time
- Teach student to recognize signs of emotional upset and to use 'self-calming' strategies
- Teach the student how to negotiate with instructors about assignments or work expectations
- Use motivation strategies to make learning more inviting (see Finding the Spark)

Stage 2: Defensiveness

Warning Signs: The student may...

- lash out verbally at others
- withdraw (emotionally or physically)
- challenge the authority of the instructor or other adult
- refuse to comply with adult requests or to follow classroom routines
- project blame onto others

Strategies to prevent or reduce the intensity of student defensiveness:

- Avoid discussions of "who is right" or "who is in control".
- Approach the student privately, make eye contact, address the student in a quiet voice about his or her behavior.
- Use humor to 'defuse' conflict situation.
- Consider an apology if you have inadvertently wronged or offended the student.
- Impose appropriate consequences on peers if they are provoking the student through teasing, taunts, verbal challenges, or physical horseplay.
- Help the student to identify appropriate range of responses for the situation and to select one.
- Permit student some 'leeway' on assignment or classroom expectations (as an acknowledgement of the life- or situational stress that they might be experiencing).
- Teach the student non-stigmatizing ways to get academic help, support in the classroom.
- Direct the student to write down the main points of his or her concerns. Promise that you will read through the student's account and meet individually to discuss the problem.
- Use effective 'teacher commands' to direct the student: **(1)** keep each command brief, **(2)** state command directly rather than in "Could you please..." format, **(3)** use businesslike tone, avoiding anger and sarcasm, **(4)** avoid lengthy explanations for why you are making the request, **(5)** repeat command once if student fails to comply, then follow up with pre-determined consequences.
- Use planned ignoring (NOTE: This strategy works best when the student lacks an audience).

Stage 3: Aggression

Warning Signs: The student may...

- make verbal threats.
- use abusive language.
- assume threatening posture (e.g., with fists raised).
- physically strike out at peers or adults.

Strategies to react to, prepare for or respond to student verbal or physical aggression:

- Remove other students or adults from the immediate vicinity of student (to protect their safety, eliminate an audience)
- Adopt a 'supportive stance': step slightly to the side of the student and orient your body so that you face the student obliquely at a 45- to 90-degree angle.
- Respect the student's 'personal space.' Most people interpret the distance extending outward from their body to a distance of 2-1/2 to 3 feet as a bubble of 'personal space.' To both ensure

your physical safety and reduce the student's sense of threat, always stand at least a leg's length away from the student.

- Use supportive 'paraverbal' and non-verbal communication. Children are adept at 'reading' our moods and feelings through non-verbal signals such as facial expressions, and body language. Maintain a calm tone of voice and body posture to project acceptance and support for the student.
 - Do not block the door. Unless you have a compelling reason to do so (e.g., with very young children), try not to block the upset child's access to the door as you approach the student. The student may interpret a blocked exit as a threat and attempt to go around or even through you to escape.
 - Deliver a clear statement of choices. Here is a 3-step approach for making requests to upset students:
 - 1. Give the student two clear choices with clear consequences. Order the choices so that the student hears the teacher-preferred choice last e.g., "John, you can refuse to participate in the math assignment and be written up for detention or you can start the math assignment now and not be written up." Make sure above all that you can enforce any consequences that you present to the student.
 - 2. If the student fails to comply in a reasonable amount of time to Step 1, state clearly and firmly what you want the student to do. Include a time limit for student compliance and specify a location if necessary. For example, a teacher may tell the student, "John, I want you to return to your desk [location] now [time-frame] and begin your math assignment [requested behavior]."
 - 3. If the student still fails to comply with your request, enforce alternative consequences that you have selected in advance.
-

References

Long, N.J., Morse, W.C., Newman, R.G. (1980). *Conflict in the classroom*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Myles, B.S., & Simpson, R.L. (1994). Prevention and management considerations for aggressive and violent children and youth. *Education & Treatment of Children*, 17, 370-384.

Steiger, L.K. (1987). *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention: A program focusing on management of disruptive, assaultive, or out-of-control behavior*. Brookfield, WI: National Crisis Prevention Institute.

Walker, H.M., & Walker, J.E. (1991). *Coping with non-compliance in the classroom: A positive approach for teachers*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed, Inc.

Reprinted with permission from Jim Wright from www.interventioncentral.org.