

# Art & Science of Teaching

## Defusing Out-of-Control Behavior

It's vital to have a plan in place that deescalates the incident as quickly as possible and minimizes its impact.

**T**he vast majority of discipline problems a teacher will deal with throughout the year are typically routine issues that classroom rules and procedures have been established to address. A teacher can usually deal with a student who talks in class instead of quietly listening to a video recording or who doesn't follow the procedure for completing independent seatwork.

But what about the rare occasion when a student becomes out of control? For example, I've heard of students getting angry and throwing chairs, cursing at other students, or even threatening the teacher. On these (hopefully) rare occasions, what should a teacher do?<sup>1</sup>

### Create a Plan—And Follow It

First and foremost, teachers should have a plan for dealing with such events. You need to think out your reactions and design them in view of quickly extinguishing a volatile situation. I recommend you take the following steps.

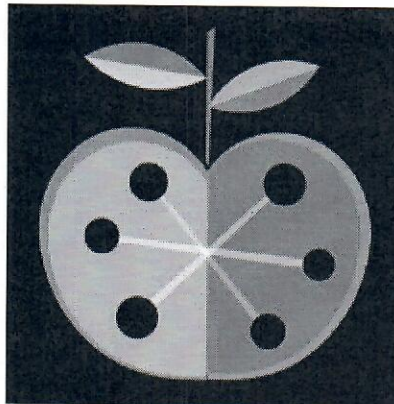
#### Step 1: Know your students' tendencies.

Previous incidents of aggressive behavior are one of the best predictors of future incidents. Therefore, it's useful to be aware of students who have exhibited such outbreaks in the past.

However, don't use these incidents as justification for branding a student as a troublemaker. Rather, afford those students some extra attention so that they know they're welcomed and valued in class. Systematic and planned positive interactions can go a long way to decrease the possibility of future problems.

#### Step 2: Recognize that the student is out of control.

Ideally, you should know your students well enough that you can tell when they've reached their breaking point. Evidence of being out of control might be wild gestures or shouting. However, a student might also sit silently for a while before erupting. Be aware of incidents that might provoke one or more students, such as a recent quarrel or fight they might have had.



#### Step 3: Put physical distance between yourself and the student, and avoid threatening behavior.

If a student is agitated enough to act out physically, it's best to give that student physical space so he or she doesn't feel threatened or provoked. Avoid behaviors that students might interpret as aggressive, such as pointing your finger,

raising your voice, squinting your eyes, moving toward them, or hovering over them. Instead, try to speak directly to the student in a calm and respectful manner. Look directly at the student without glaring or staring; try to keep your expression neutral.

It's also important to put some distance between the agitated student and his or her classmates, especially if the student is lashing out against a peer. One way to do this is by placing yourself between the agitated student and the rest of the class. In more extreme cases, you might tell the other students to simply move to one corner of the room.

#### Step 4: Calm yourself.

When a student loses control, it's natural for you to feel personally attacked. This can lead

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you to take an aggressive stance. While interacting with the agitated student, try repeating affirmations like these to yourself: “The student’s outbreak is not a personal attack on me; this student must be in a lot of pain to act out this way” or, “This is a brief moment in time. Don’t make things worse. Help it pass quickly without causing harm to anyone, including the student.”

**Step 5: Listen attentively.**

Actively listen to the student so he or she *knows* you’re listening. Listen without agreeing or disagreeing. Be as neutral as possible in your body posture, gestures, and facial expressions but actively focus on what the student is saying. Try to understand his or her viewpoint. When the student has finished speaking, say “I think I understand how you feel” or “I understand what you’re thinking.” Then ask, “What else is bothering

you?” Finally, after the student speaks again, repeat the process. After a while, he or she won’t be able to think of anything else to say and will most likely be calmer as a result of having been heard out.

**Step 6: Remove the student from the situation.**


When the student is calm, keep repeating a simple request designed to remove the student from the immediate situation. “Louis, I want you to go with me out to the hallway to get things back to normal. Can we please do that now?” Repeat the request calmly but persistently until the student complies.

**Step 7: Set up a plan to avoid future outbreaks.**

A day or so after the incident, make sure to connect with the student to let him or her know that you harbor no grudge and wish to reestablish a

positive relationship. Discuss why the incident occurred, using active listening strategies to let the student know you’ve heard what he or she said. Establish a plan of action with the student that ensures that in the future he or she will communicate with you well before things escalate out of control.

**Just in Case**

Outbreaks like these should never occur in class. But if they do, it’s vital to have a plan in place that deescalates the incident as quickly as possible and minimizes the negative impact on the offending student, his or her classmates, and the teacher. 

<sup>1</sup>I’m referring in this column to out-of-control behavior that is out of control—to a degree. If a student makes threats or exhibits violent behavior, such as attacking another student or brandishing a weapon, call school security immediately. This is no longer a matter for the teacher to resolve.



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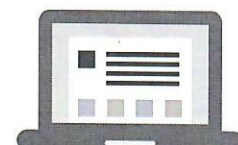
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