

Interrupting Crisis Behavior: Pre-Correcting Problem Behavior

Pre-Correction is a proactive strategy designed to prevent or interrupt predictable problem behavior from occurring and increase the likelihood of expected behavior taking place. Essentially, the teacher **anticipates** problem behavior based on the student(s) previous behavior patterns or knowledge of student behavior in general. Given this information, the teacher takes measures to disrupt this behavior pattern. For example, the teacher knows that when the students come back from an assembly, they are likely to be noisy and unruly. So the teacher meets them at the door and has a task ready for them as soon as they enter the room.

In general, pre-correction strategies require knowing what sets off the behavior (triggers) and the likely problem behavior. Given this information, the teacher can develop strategies to offset the problem behavior and facilitate acceptable behavior.

Pre-correction procedures, used in conjunction with correction procedures, provide educators with a very effective and efficient method for preventing and managing a wide range of problem behavior that occurs in classroom and school settings. The combined uses of these two procedures involve seven basic steps:

1. Identifying the Context (trigger) and the Predictable Problem Behavior
2. Specifying Expected Behaviors
3. Modifying the Context
4. Conducting Behavior Rehearsals
5. Providing Strong Reinforcement for Expected Behaviors
6. Prompting Expected Behaviors
7. Monitoring the Plan

Case Study

The complete seven-step, pre-correction procedure is illustrated in an example involving a student who comes in from recess shouting, laughing, and pushing other students. Every day the teacher spends a considerable amount of time trying to get him settled so she can hand out materials and explain the math class. It often takes 5-7 minutes to gain control of him and have the class engaged with the math activity. The teacher examined the situation closely and developed the following pre-correction plan.

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Pre-Correction Checklist and Plan

Teacher: *S. Endow*

Date: *4/2/01*

Student: *Dominic*

Class: *Grade 3*

1. Context

Problem Behavior

Transition from recess to the classroom

Shouting, laughing, pushing; down time before he complies with directions and becomes on task.

2. Expected Behavior

Enter room quietly, hands to self, go straight to desk and begin entry task on chalkboard.

3. Context Modification

Teacher meets students at door, has them wait a few seconds until everyone is in line, reminds them to go straight to their desks and begin the math puzzle that is on the chalkboard.

4. Behavior Rehearsal

Teacher reminds Dominic just before recess to come into the room quietly, go to his desk and start the math activity and Dominic was asked to repeat the expectations.

5. Strong Reinforcement

Dominic was told that if he could follow the rules coming into class after recess, the teacher would be very pleased and that he could earn some free time on the computer (one of his favorite choice activities).

6. Prompts

The teacher meets the class at the door and gestures for everyone to be quiet and points to the math activity on the board. She catches Dominic and says, "Let's get started real quickly on the math puzzle."

7. Monitoring Plan

The teacher uses her watch to measure how long it takes Dominic to reach his desk and begin work after he passes through the door.

Walker, Colvin & Ramsey (1995) pp. 176-183.



Interrupting Crisis Behavior: Utilizing Effective Correction Procedures for Attention-Getting Behavior

The need for attention has been identified as one of the most common explanations for problem behavior in the classroom, such as student talk-outs, interruptions, off-task behavior, clowning around behavior, and repeated requests for assistance. However, a relatively common experience for teachers is that when they address these relatively minor problem behaviors, the students react and exhibit worse behavior. Then the teacher has to deal with the more serious behavior which could possibly lead to crisis behavior. To prevent this kind of escalation it is critical for teachers to have simple, efficient and non-inflammatory procedures for correcting minor attention-getting behavior. The goal of these strategies is to interrupt the chain of behavior and assist the student to engage in the present activities in the classroom.

Use a correction plan that contains a series of steps in which the least intrusive step is used first and more intrusive measures come into play only if the problem behavior persists. For example:

1. Remove attention from the student who is displaying inappropriate attention-getting behavior, and acknowledge other students nearby who are exhibiting the expected behavior.
2. Redirect the student to the expected behavior with a gesture or verbal prompt, and be sure to acknowledge subsequent cooperation and displays of expected behavior by the student.
3. Secure the student's attention and clearly inform him or her of the expected behavior, provide immediate opportunities for practice, and acknowledge the changed behavior when it occurs.
4. Deliver a brief warning by providing an opportunity for the student to choose between displaying the expected behavior and experiencing a penalty or loss of privilege.
5. Deliver the penalty or loss of privilege in a matter-of-fact matter (for example, timeout or loss of some recess time) and do not argue with the student about details of the penalty.

CAUTION: Do not become engaged in a power struggle with the student in using these procedures. If the student begins to escalate delay responding and utilize the procedures suggested in the topic, *Managing Agitation*.

Colvin & Lazar (1997) p.79.

Colvin, (1999), *Defusing Anger and Aggression* Video (Vignette # 1).



Interrupting Crisis Behavior: *Managing Off-Task Behavior*

Off-task behavior is one of the most common minor problem behaviors teachers have to deal with in the classroom. This behavior can readily escalate to more serious behavior if it is not managed carefully. There are two broad reasons for students to display off-task behavior; (a) to obtain attention from the teacher or other students, and (b) to avoid the task because they cannot do the work or are bored with it. If the teacher believes that the off-task behavior is motivated by attention needs then follow the procedures listed in utilizing *Effective Correction Procedures for Attention-Getting Behavior*. If the motivation is avoidance then the teacher needs to assess the student's skill level and proceed accordingly. For example, if the student can demonstrate mastery of the topic, new or more challenging work needs to be provided. However, if the student does not have the skills for the task then more instruction is needed such as more explanations or easier practice examples need to be provided.

Note: In trying to determine the motivation for off-task behavior, whether it is attention-getting or avoidance, it is better to start with the hypothesis that the explanation is avoidance, that is assess the student's skill level. The student's subsequent behavior will provide the necessary feedback.

Colvin & Lazar (1997) pp.57-61.

Colvin (1999), *Defusing Anger and Aggression* Video (Vignette #1).

Colvin, Ainge & Nelson (1997),pp.47-51.



Interrupting Crisis Behavior: *Managing Agitation*

Sometimes students are already agitated when they enter a situation and as soon as a demand is placed on them or their behavior is corrected, they can escalate to quite serious explosive behavior. For example, Jamie's body language and tone of voice indicate he is upset. The teacher asks him to sit down and begin his work. He then uses profanities and storms out of the classroom. However, this escalation may have been defused if the teacher had used techniques to settle the student down before the direction to begin work was given.

There are two basic steps for addressing agitation; (a) identify the signs of agitation and, (b) utilize techniques for defusing agitation.

Signs of Agitation

Students show agitation by either increasing distracting behavior or decreasing active, engaged behavior. Here are some examples of increases in distracting behavior: darting eyes, non-conversational language, "busy" hands, moving in and out of groups, frequent off-task and on-task behavior, starting and stopping activities and moving around the room.

On the other hand, students may be agitated and not show it. These students display agitation by displaying decreases in behavior and less engagement in activities such as: staring into space, subdued language, contained hands, lack of interaction and involvement in activities, withdrawal from groups, lack of responding in general and avoidance of eye contact.

Techniques for Defusing Agitation

Once the teacher recognizes that the student is agitated, the primary goal is to use strategies to calm the student down and carefully assist him or her to become engaged in the class activity. Because these strategies are essentially supportive in nature, it is very important to use them early, (before the behavior becomes serious), otherwise the teacher may reinforce the serious behavior. The key is **timing**. Use the following techniques at the earliest indications of agitation:

1. **Teacher support:** Communicate concern to the student.
2. **Space:** Provide the student with an opportunity to have some isolation from the rest of the class.
3. **Choices:** Give the student some choices or options.
4. **Preferred activities:** Allow the student to engage in a preferred activity for a short period of time to help regain focus.

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5. **Teacher proximity:** Move near or stand near the student.
6. **Independent activities:** Engage the student in independent activities to provide isolation.
7. **Movement activities:** Use activities or tasks that require movement, such as running errands, cleaning the chalkboard, or distributing papers.
8. **Involvement of the student:** Where possible involve the student in the plan. In this way there is more chance of ownership and generalization to other settings.
9. **Relaxation activities:** Use audiotapes, drawing activities, breathing and relaxation techniques.
10. **Use passive activities:** Use activities that have low demand on the students such as reading to the class, or have them watch an instructional video tape.

Since agitation is a very common predictor of serious or crisis behavior, it is very important for teachers to develop a sharp eye in identifying agitation as early as possible and implement strategies that are designed to calm the student down and reorient the student to the current class activity.

Walker, Colvin & Ramsey (1995), pp. 72-119.
Colvin (1999), *Defusing Anger and Aggression Video* (Vignette #3).
Colvin, Ainge & Nelson (1997), pp.47-51.



Interrupting Crisis Behavior: Managing Provocative or Challenging Behavior

Sometimes a student will break a rule deliberately to challenge the teacher. Quite often the teacher will address the problem and give the student a direction, which the student will refuse to follow. In this way the student sets the stage for confrontation. For example, a student wears a T-shirt that has a rude message on it. The teacher addresses the issue telling the student that the shirt is a violation of the school dress code and that he needs to go to the restroom and turn it inside out. The student refuses to follow the direction and a confrontation scene is established. In other words the stage is set for escalation. The student's behavior will escalate or become defused depending for the most part on how the teacher addresses the problem. There are three clear steps for defusing this kind of challenging behavior.

1. State the rule or expectation that is being challenged in a calm yet firm manner.
2. Request explicitly for the student to take care of the problem.
3. Lead the student to consider options or present options on how to take care of the problem.

For example, in the case of the student with the offensive T-shirt, the teacher would take him aside and say, "Joe, that T-shirt is not acceptable in a public school. It has a rude message." (*State the Rule*). "I need you to take care of it please." (*Ask the student to take charge of the problem*). "What is your plan?" If the student does not come up with a plan the teacher could say something like, "You can turn it inside out, get a shirt from the gym or wear a jacket. I don't care but I need you to take care of it please." (*Review options*).

Colvin, Ainge & Nelson (1997),pp.47-51.

Colvin (1999), *Defusing Anger and Aggression* Video (Vignette #2).



Interrupting Crisis Behavior: *Responding to Disrespectful Behavior*

Another common strategy students use to engage staff is to use disrespectful behavior. These behaviors include negative comments towards staff, insults, profanity, and verbal abuse. If the teacher takes these behaviors personally and reacts strongly then the student could likely react as well and exhibit even more serious behavior such as serious threats or even assault. Again the question arises, “Could this situation have been defused versus escalated.” The key in managing these behaviors is to realize that the student is trying to control the situation by “pressing buttons” to obtain an emotional reaction from the teacher. Four steps are suggested for defusing these situations and avoiding escalation to crisis behavior:

1. **Delay responding:** Clearly the student is setting up the teacher for a reaction. By delaying responding, pausing slightly, the teacher communicates to the student that he or she is in control of his or her behavior and will not simply react.
2. **Studiously avoid using escalating prompts:** These are reactive teacher behaviors that are likely to escalate the student such as agitation, frustration, cornering the student, touching, grabbing, nagging, discrediting remarks and challenging the student.
3. **Calmly respond to the problem behavior in a firm but controlled tone:** For example, the teacher might say, “Michael, that language is unacceptable and I am going to follow-up on this shortly.”
4. **Deliver an appropriate negative consequence:** Provide independent task for the class to perform. Approach the student privately. Deliver a negative consequence that has been preplanned and specified within the class rules. Such consequences may include response cost techniques, loss of privileges, detention, etc.

Here are some additional guidelines for approaching a student who is being disrespectful or possibly dangerous: Move slowly and deliberately toward the problem situation, speak privately, calmly and respectfully, minimize body language, keep a reasonable distance, establish eye-level position where possible, be brief, focus on expected behavior, withdraw if the problem escalates and acknowledge cooperation where appropriate.

In general, effective management of disrespect is largely determined by how we respond. If we are controlled and respectful we are more likely to defuse the situation and avoid escalation to crisis behavior.

Colvin (1999), *Defusing Anger and Aggression* Video (Vignette # 3).
Colvin (In Preparation), *Classroom Management Systems*, p.13.



Interrupting Crisis Behavior: *Establishing Limits and Defusing Defiance*

One of the most troublesome behaviors that teachers face in a classrooms is non-compliance, defiance or insubordination. This behavior of refusing to follow directions is problematic for three important reasons; (a) teachers need cooperation from students in order to teach and (b) non-compliance quickly disrupts the teaching/learning process and (c) non-compliance can easily escalate to serious or crisis behavior. Teachers need strategies that can help them establish limits with their students (i.e., break-up sustained non-compliance), establish cooperation and to avoid escalation to serious behavior. Three main steps are involved in defusing non-compliance and establishing cooperation: (a) pre-teach, (b) deliver the choices to the student in a non-confrontational manner, and (c) follow-through based on the student response.

1. ***Pre-teach the procedures:*** The purpose of this step is to make sure that the student understands the procedures. Carefully rehearse and explain the procedures to the class or individual students. For younger students it is important to model the procedures. The pre-teaching should occur at a neutral time or time when the student is relatively calm.
2. ***Present choices in a non-confrontational manner by:***
 - (a) Present the expected behavior and a negative consequence as a decision (place responsibility on the student).
 - (b) Allow a few seconds for the student to decide (to allow the student to calm down, process the choices and to save face).
 - (c) Withdraw from the student and attend to other students. This also helps the student to save face, leaves them with the decision and helps the teacher to disengage and manage the rest of the class.
3. ***Follow through:*** If the student chooses the expected behavior, briefly acknowledge the choice and continue with the class activity. If the student does not choose the expected behavior follow through with the negative consequence.

Example

Students are engaged in working on some math problems except for Sarah who is wandering the room. The teacher followed the usual procedures of attending to the students on task and providing some prompts for Sarah to sit down and begin her work. The teacher then said, "Sarah. Look it really is time for get started on you math." Sarah says, "No way. I am not doing any dumb math." The teacher pauses, acknowledges a student on task then approaches Sarah and says as privately as possible, "Sarah, you are asked to start your math (*expected behavior*) or you are going to have to do it at recess (*negative consequence*). You have a few seconds to

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decide.” The teacher leaves Sarah and moves to assist or check on the work of some other students. When the teacher returns to Sarah she has moved to her desk and opened a book mumbling that she still doesn’t like math. The teacher, approaches her says very quietly, “Thank you Sarah for getting started on your math.” The teacher then leaves Sarah.

In general the key to managing non-compliance and for setting limits lies in the teacher’s delivery. Present the expected behavior and a negative consequence as a choice, give the student some time to decide and then withdraw for a few seconds.

Colvin, Ainge & Nelson (1997),pp.47-51.

Colvin (1999), *Defusing Anger and Aggression* Video (Vignette #5).

Walker, Colvin & Ramsey (1995), p.109.



Interrupting Crisis Behavior: *Managing Threats and Intimidating Behavior*

Students may escalate to a point of serious confrontational behavior involving threats and intimidation. The teacher may follow the procedures for establishing limits and the student reacts instantly by delivering a serious threat to the teacher. At this point imminent danger is a critical consideration. The primary concern here is to avoid escalating the student or putting the student in a position that he or she feels compelled to follow-through with the threat. The key here is to **disengage and get assistance**. Teachers should not feel compelled or pressured to manage this situation by themselves. Their safety is the controlling variable, which means that the teacher's response is designed to disengage. There are three critical steps for the teacher to follow in response to a threat:

1. **Pause:** Look at the student, look down. Communicate that you are thinking. It is very important to delay responding.
2. **Disengage:** Look at the student and say something like, "Just a second," and pull away. Keep in mind that when a student makes a threat they give you some time to respond.
3. **Seek assistance:** Withdraw from the student and seek assistance from another teacher and follow your school procedures.

The most important consideration in defusing this situation is to prevent further escalation. The student threat will be followed up, typically through an office referral.

Colvin, Ainge & Nelson (1997), pp.47-51.
Colvin (1999), *Defusing Anger and Anggression* Video (Vignette # 6).
Colvin (2000), *Managing Threats* Video.

