

TIPS FOR DE-ESCALATION

Adapted from <https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/43049/20-tips-to-help-de-escalate-interactions-with-anxious-or-defiant-students>

When children are anxious, they express poor self-regulation, negative thinking cycles that they cannot stop, and inflexible thinking; they can often seem un-empathetic. When calm, they can express the skill; when anxious, they cannot.

All behavior has a function. For children with anxiety, negative attention is often easier to get and easier to understand.

TIP: Don't ignore low-level negative attention seeking with an anxious student (their anxiety goes up)

Instead, actively engage them at the beginning of class or a new situation with positive attention (Ex, "can't wait to see what you think of this...I'll check on you in 5 minutes" – then do so, then "I'll check on you again in 10 minutes" and do so)

TIP: Don't publicly praise positive behavior with an anxious student (again, their anxiety often goes up).

Instead, use nonverbal, private praise instead – a nod, a smile, a thumbs up, a wink – to acknowledge them

PREDICTABLE ANXIETY TRIGGERS:

- Unstructured Time
- Transitions
- Writing Time
- Unexpected Change

ANTECEDENTS OF NEGATIVE BEHAVIOR:

- Unfacilitated social interaction
- Being asked to wait
- Being told "No"
- Writing
- Transition

TIP: Teach "waiting time" strategies – like appropriate doodling, etc.

TIP: If an anxious student needs a break, pair the break with a cognitive distraction.

Instead, allow the student to record themselves reading out loud for a younger child, for example, or sing, do sports trivia, or a crossword puzzle. It is impossible to read out loud (engage your mind/mouth) and think another thought (like a negative internal thought or worry).

TIP: Don't use a count down (anxiety goes up)

Instead, walk over to the student, say, "together let's find a good stopping point"

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TIP: Give an “in-between step” for transitions.

Rather than going from recess to a spelling quiz, for example, consider going from recess, to coloring or a two-minute YouTube video on a related topic, to the quiz

TIP: Use a biofeedback tool.

EmWave or inexpensive sensor; concrete, visual, grounding for the child to reduce anxiety

TIP: Teach them how to do a body check (2x/day).

Do it together when calm (rehearse) for awhile. Later: prompt, “body check, please”

TIP: Let the student preview the work for the day.

Start at home the night before IF this is helpful.

TIP: Rehearse replies to confrontations.

If this is common (as for example on the playground), rehearse a statement like “I don’t have time for this” and walking away. Can also be helpful to give the child something to hold in their hands while they walk away (a piece of paper, a folder, something not usually thrown)

TIP: Teach strategies like skipping hard questions at first, working with a buddy, double checking work.

TIP: Ask them how hard they estimate a task will be before they start, and then again after they have completed it.

This can be helpful, take data and show them the pattern in their responses. This may allow for more realistic assessment over time.

TIP: Randomly be kind as you repair the relationship.

TIP: Give them a leadership role in an area they are competent.

TIP: Teach them not to ask Yes or No questions AND Do Not use Yes or No questions with them.

For example, they might ask, “Can I work with ____?” Reframe: “Oh, did you want to know when you could work with ____? You can ask: When can I work with ____?” Then the answer is not an outright NO.

TIP: Give time and space.

Don’t force eye contact or physical proximity. Maybe use a note “please stop tapping”, put it on their desk and walk away, don’t make eye contact for a few minutes

TIP: Reward practice or strategy use, NOT performance.

Reinforce and reward practicing the skills even if success is not immediate.