

Verbal De-Escalation in the Classroom

Barbara Karp

University of Pittsburgh

April 2010



Table of Contents

1. Definition of Verbal De-escalation	3
2. Glossary of Terms to Know	4
3. Case Study I	6
4. Case Study Revisited (with verbal de-escalation implemented)	8
5. Discussion Questions, Answer Key, & Other Scenarios	10
6. Frequently Asked Questions	15
7. Annotated Bibliography	17

What is “Verbal De-Escalation”?

Verbal De-Escalation is a targeted intervention for use with students who are at risk for aggression. It is basically using calm language, along with other communication techniques, to diffuse, re-direct, or de-escalate a conflict situation (Kerr & Nelson, 2010).



Glossary of terms to know:

Behavior Escalation: The cycle or stages in which conflict and/or undesirable behavior worsens and becomes more intense, serious, and possibly dangerous (Fecser & Long, 1998; Colvin & Sugai, 1989).

Conflict Cycle: A school of thought expounded by the Life Space Crisis Intervention group that behavior escalation is cyclical, and teacher intervention can actually be counter-productive. The cycle includes: 1) a stressful incident; 2) the student's feelings or reaction; 3) the student's observable behavior (or misbehavior); and 4) the teacher's reaction (which can become a stressful incident. The teacher's reaction can serve to perpetuate and even escalate the conflict when the teacher uses negative criticism, reprimands, and punishment (Fecser & Long, 1998).

Diffusing or De-Escalating Behavior: Utilizing research-based positive behavior supports and interventions to lessen and alleviate conflict with the goal of returning to the stage of recovery or the state of calm (Duggan & Dawson, 2004).

Glossary of terms to know (continued):

Seven Stages of Behavior Escalation: According to Geoff Colvin and Gregory Sugai, both pioneers and experts in the field of Positive Behavior Intervention, there are seven stages of behavior escalation:

1. **Calm** – the student is relatively calm and cooperative.
2. **Trigger** - the student experiences unresolved conflicts that serve to trigger the student's behavior to escalate.
3. **Agitation** - the student is increasingly unfocused and upset.
4. **Acceleration** - as the conflict remains unresolved, the student actually FOCUSES on the conflict.
5. **Peak** - the student is out of control and exhibits the most severe behavior.
6. **De-escalation** – having vented in the peak stage, the student displays confusion in this phase, but the severity of the peak behavior subsides.
7. **Recovery** - the student often wishes to participate in *non-engagement* activities such as going to the nurse or counselor's office, or putting her head down.

(Colvin & Sugai, 1989)

Case Study

Without use of Verbal De-Escalation

Setting: 4th grade art class. The Student is Emily, who the art teacher sent to the office last week for throwing pencils in class.

Stage 1: Calm

Student: [Looks calm and ready to work. Teacher says nothing.]

Stage 2: Trigger

Teacher: “Ok, class, today you will draw your favorite pet. If you don’t have a pet, just draw someone else’s pet and underneath the drawing, write why you like to spend time with this pet.”

Student: [Emily looks upset, angry, and sighs deeply.]

Teacher: “Emily, I don’t like that look on your face, and I am certainly not going to stand for more of your bad behavior and acting like a big baby again like you did last week, do you HEAR ME?”

Student: [Stares at teacher.]

Teacher: “DID YOU HEAR ME? Are you deaf? Now get drawing and try to follow directions this time EMILY!”

Student: “I’m not drawing a stupid pet!”

Teacher: “OH YES YOU ARE, or you’re losing recess again and maybe even taking a trip to the principal’s office.”

Stage 3: Agitation

Student: [Emily knocks over the pencils.]

Teacher: “Now look what you did!!! Pick those up right now!”

Student: [Emily puts hands on head, confused as to what to do.]

Teacher: “Hey, I’ll give you until the count of 3 to PICK THOSE UP. 1, 2, . . .”

Student: [Student begins picking up the pencils .]

Stage 4: Acceleration

Teacher: [Teacher points at Emily.] “LOOK YOU, you’re acting like someone half your age!! Maybe you’d like to join the kindergarten class on the first floor! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!”

Student: [Emily picks up a pencil and waves it at the teacher, and screams:] “LEAVE ME ALONE!!”

Stage 5: Peak

Teacher: [Teacher gets right in Emily’s face.] “YOU BETTER CALM DOWN! I’m sure the entire class is sick and tired of your ridiculous behavior – now APOLOGIZE TO THE WHOLE CLASS RIGHT NOW!!!”

Student: “I HATE YOU!!!” [Emily throws a pencil, knocks the table over and runs out of the room.]

Teacher: [Yelling at the student down the hall.] “YOU GET BACK HERE RIGHT NOW!!!! WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU’RE GOING? YOU BETTER BE HEADING STRAIGHT FOR THE PRINCIPAL’S OFFICE!!!”

* * *

Stage 6: De-Escalation, and **Stage 7: Recovery**, take place in the principal’s office. Not pleased, the principal realizes that an inordinate number of students from this particular teacher’s class end up in his office. He believes that this teacher desperately needs some training in verbal de-escalation strategies.

Now, let’s take another look at the scenario between Emily and her teacher with the intervention of Verbal De-Escalation.

Case Study Revisited

Verbal De-Escalation Implemented

4th Grade Art Class

Stage 1: Calm

Student: [Looks calm and ready to work.]

Teacher: “Hello everybody! Welcome to Art Class! I see some students, like Allison, are in their seats with their pencil cups and tablets out and ready to go! Thank you for that!”

Stage 2: Trigger

Teacher: “Today, I thought we would draw and write about our favorite pet.”

Student: [Allison looks upset, angry, and sighs deeply.]

Teacher: “Allison, is something wrong?”

Student: “No.”

Teacher: “OK, class, please get started and I’ll be coming around the class to see how you’re doing.” [Teacher goes over to student, and sits about three feet away to speak privately.]

Student: “WHAT DO YOU WANT??!!”

Teacher: “Allison, I can tell something is bothering you. I wish you would share it with me.”

Student: “I’M NOT DRAWING A STUPID PET!”

Teacher: “I know you like to draw and you are a really good artist. Can you tell me what you are upset about?”

Student: “Nothing.”

Teacher: “Is it the assignment?”

Student: [Student puts her head in her hands and nods.]

Teacher: “What is it, Allison?”

Student: “My dog died last week. I really loved him so much.” [**Puts her head down** on the desk and **starts to cry.**]

Teacher: “I am so sorry to hear that Allison. And I can certainly understand why this assignment would really upset you. I love my dogs (and my cats), and I know how horrible it is to lose one. I would like to talk about this later in private if you want. For now, would you like to try to draw something else?”

Student: “I guess so.”

Teacher: “Ok, great. Have any ideas of what you might want to draw?”

Student: “Well, we are going on vacation this summer, and I have been thinking about that to make me feel better. So maybe I can draw the beach or something.”

Teacher: “I think that’s a wonderful idea. If you feel ok now, I’m going to check on the rest of the class. Please let me know if you need me, ok?”

Student: “OK, I will.”

Teacher: “Thanks, Allison, for sharing with me what you are going through! I am very proud of you!”

In this case, note what the teacher said and did to diffuse the conflict and actually change the outcome. In addition, the teacher learned what triggered the conflict while also making a genuine connection with the student.

Verbal De-Escalation Discussion Questions:

Answer Key

Let's take another look at the initial case study.

In the first scenario, what did the teacher do wrong and why do you believe that was wrong?



Answers will vary, but the teacher did almost everything wrong. She did not praise the student at the beginning when the student was calm and ready to work, nor did she praise the student when she complied with her demand to pick up the pencils. The teacher continually escalated the conflict at each stage by yelling, ridiculing, pointing, humiliating, demanding an apology, and getting in the student's face. The teacher also brought up the student's past behavior, and even insisted on having the last word by continuing to yell at the student while the student ran down the hall to get away from her.

What did the teacher do right, and why do you believe that was the right thing to do?

Answers will vary and will likely be a short list. One positive thing the teacher did was to tell the student to head to the principal's office, thereby directing the student to a safe place (rather than having the student run out the school door).

Verbal De-Escalation Discussion Questions:

Answer Key (continued)

Now let's take another look at the case study revisited.

In this second scenario, what did the teacher do wrong and why do you believe that was wrong?

Answers will vary and will likely be a short list in this case. Perhaps the teacher could have anticipated the student starting to cry and could have taken her out of the room for privacy. This may not have been possible, however, with a classroom full of other students.



What did the teacher do right, and why do you believe that was the right thing to do?

Again, answers will vary. The teacher implemented many verbal de-escalation techniques to diffuse the conflict and discover the reasons behind the student's actions (i.e., the function of the behavior). She praised the student when she saw the student calm, paying attention, and ready to work. When she noticed the student was agitated, she first asked her what was wrong, and then realized she needed to talk to the student one-on-one rather than yelling at her in front of the entire class. Instead of mirroring the student's anger, the teacher remained calm. By listening to the student and asking just a couple of questions in a respectful and caring manner, the teacher found out the student wasn't just "acting like a big baby" as the teacher in Case Study I stated; rather, the student was justifiably upset at the art assignment to draw a favorite pet because her dog died. The teacher empathized with her, validated the student's feelings, expressed the desire to discuss it further in private at a later time, and gave the student the choice to draw something else. Finally, the teacher thanked the student for sharing her painful experience with her and told the student she was proud of her.

FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions:

Q. What age group is this intervention appropriate for?

A. Verbal de-escalation can (and should) be used with any age group, even adults!

Q. What is the most important thing to remember when implementing verbal de-escalation?

A. You need to self-monitor your words, tone of voice, and body language. Do not argue or insist on getting the last word.

Q. How long does it take to see the results of implementing verbal de-escalation?

A. Results of this practical intervention are immediate. As the student begins to calm down, the teacher has the opportunity to further de-escalate, offer non-judgmental listening to the student's explanation, and use non-confrontational guided questions to help the student recover (Duggan & Dawson, 2004).

FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions (continued):

Q. What are the long-term effects of using verbal de-escalation in the classroom?

A. Like other positive behavior support interventions, the effects of using verbal de-escalation have been proven to promote student growth and development and ultimately, to further student learning. Teachers find success when offering students constructive, corrective feedback to address students' inappropriate behavior instead of criticizing or punishing students (Duggan & Dawson, 2004).

Annotated Bibliography

Amendola, A. M., & Oliver, R. N. (2003). LSCI and aggression replacement training: a multi-modal approach. *Reclaiming Children and Youth: The Journal of Strength-based Interventions*, 12(3), 181-185.

This article combines the principles of Long and Fescer's Life Space Crisis Intervention ("LSCI"), specifically Stage 5 of LSCI, "New Skills," with Aggression Replacement Training ("ART"), developed by Arnold P. Goldstein, Barry Glick, and John Gibbs. It focuses on teaching students new skills to enable them to cope and deal with conflict, particularly peer conflict. A. Mark Amendola, a licensed clinical social worker, serves as co-editor of *Reclaiming Children and Youth: The Journal of Strength-based Interventions*, and executive director of Perseus House, Inc. Robert W. Oliver, EdD serves as assistant superintendent of the City of Erie, PA School District. This article refers to LSCI as a verbal intervention strategy for students in crisis. It serves as a good background for my discussion of LSCI verbal de-escalation techniques.

Colvin, G. (2004). *Managing the cycle of acting-out behavior in the classroom*. Eugene, OR: Behavior Associates.

In this book, Colvin maps out the seven phases in the cycle of acting-out behavior on a time and intensity graph. As in his other books, he then offers practical intervention strategies for dealing with the various phases. Dr. Geoff Colvin is a nationally recognized educational and behavioral consultant, general and special education teacher and administrator, research associate at the University of Oregon, author and co-author of more than 80 publications. In addition to providing a great description and visual model of the

phases in the cycle of acting-out behavior, Colvin points out ways in which teachers' reactions often result in fueling the fire and escalating the undesirable behavior rather than de-escalating it. Colvin's common sense, practical approach offers great solutions that teachers can use to de-escalate the cycle and "break the chain" so to speak. (Colvin, p. 10.)

Colvin, G. (2009). *Managing noncompliance and defiance in the classroom: a roadmap for teachers, specialists, and behavior support teams*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

In this book, Colvin provides practical solutions for teachers and behavior support professionals in dealing with student noncompliance and defiance in a classroom setting. The first part of the book sets out to define and help readers understand noncompliant behavior. Part 2 explains triggers, setting events, the effects of noncompliant behavior, and then synthesizes all the information. The final chapter discusses what Colvin refers to as the "roadmap," that reflects "the interface between the FBA [the "Functional Behavior Assessment"] and the resulting intervention plan." (Colvin, p. 115.) Dr. Geoff Colvin is a well-known educational and behavioral consultant, general and special education teacher and administrator, research associate and the University of Oregon, author and co-author of more than 80 publications. Colvin's book provides an understanding of the nature of noncompliant behavior as well as its triggers. He offers practical strategies for teachers to avoid escalating noncompliant behavior as well as simple diffusing and redirecting techniques that tie in with my topic of verbal de-escalation for teachers.

Colvin, G., & Sugai, G. (1989). *Understanding and managing escalating behavior (ppt)*.

Retrieved January 22, 2010 from <http://www.pbis.org/common/pbisresources>.

Colvin and Sugai set forth a model for managing student behavior utilizing positive behavior intervention techniques. This ground-breaking presentation, offered in both

PowerPoint and HTML format, lays out a detailed illustration of the research-based pattern of student escalation. Then, they offer practical, positive, practical, realistic interventions that teachers can implement to circumvent and redirect further escalation. They also point out the simple truth that teachers often inadvertently “assist the student to escalate” undesirable behavior. (Colvin, 1989.) Geoff Colvin and Gregory Sugai, pioneers and experts in the field of Positive Behavior Intervention, are both widely published and cited in hardcopy and online. This 1989 Power Point could have been produced in 2010 as it is packed with timely insights that would enlighten and educate most teachers today. It also presents the information using visually appealing graphics. The work of Colvin and Sugai serves as a formidable catalyst in the field of positive behavior intervention. In my research in the area of verbal de-escalation for teachers, this presentation represents perhaps the most helpful and valuable source of understandable, practical information for classroom teachers that I have found. It lays out exactly what teachers need to do to STOP the escalation, and points out the mistakes that teachers often make to inadvertently escalate the cycle.

Duggan, D., & Dawson, C. A. (2004). Positive behavior support infused by life space crisis intervention in New York City's special education district. *Reclaiming Children and Youth: The Journal of Strength-based Interventions*, 13(1), 37-42.

The article discusses the philosophy of Life space Crisis Intervention -- that a crisis actually represents an opportunity to learn and to change. It also talks about the conflict cycle and the fact that many untrained teachers engage in power struggles with students that serve to escalate the conflict. It points out that teachers trained in LSCI techniques in New York City Schools successfully use the techniques to calm students, thereby avoiding

further escalation. Dr. Diane Duggan is a licensed psychologist, an adjunct assistant professor at New York University Graduate School of Education, and a Life Space Crisis Intervention Senior Trainer. Dr. Carol Dawson is also a LSCI Senior Trainer and coordinator of LSCI training in the New York City School District 75. In terms of verbal de-escalation, this article stresses the fact that teacher language (including positive corrective feedback) is crucial to successful implementation of Life Space Crisis Intervention and Positive Behavior Support.

Fecser, F. A., & Long, N. J. (1998). *Life space crisis intervention*. Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice. Retrieved January 21, 2010 from <http://cecp.air.org/interact/authoronline/april98/1.htm>

Like the book by the same name, Fecser and Long's article explains the conflict cycle and presents six life space crisis intervention strategies. This article presents choices that the teacher has in how to react and what to say to de-escalate and redirect the student. Dr. Frank A. Fecser is co-founder of the Life Space Crisis Intervention Institute. Dr. Nicholas J. Long is a nationally recognized leader in educating children with emotional and behavioral disorders. He is a professor emeritus of special education at American University in Washington, DC. This site provides a wealth of useful information on the conflict cycle and how to employ strategies (including verbal de-escalation) to break the cycle. It provides a detailed, real-life example of how to apply the strategy to an actual situation – what to say and what to refrain from saying.

Kerr, M. M., & Nelson, C. M. (2010). *Strategies for addressing behavior problems in the classroom* (6th ed.) Boston: Pearson.

This book provides extensive, evidence-based practices concerning positive behavior support strategies to utilize in the classroom. The book presents the material in four parts, beginning with positive behavior management, followed by assessing, intervening and evaluating intervention effects, behavioral interventions in the classroom, and finally, support and interventions outside the classroom. Dr. Mary Margaret Kerr holds a doctorate from American University in Washington, DC. She has extensive experience working with students as a licensed superintendent, administrator and classroom teacher. She also served for several years as Consent Decree Administrator for Los Angeles Unified School District, working to improve services for 85,000 students with disabilities. She currently serves as Director of the School-Based Behavior Health graduate program and the University of Pittsburgh as well as continuing her work with the Pittsburgh Public Schools and the STAR-Center youth suicide and violence prevention center. Dr. C. Michael Nelson has served as a child psychologist and spent 35 years at the Department of Special Education at the University of Kentucky. He is widely known and published in the field of children with behavior disorders and positive behavior interventions. This book contains a lot of information on positive behavior intervention, crisis intervention, and understanding behavioral escalation. Most importantly, it contains a section discussing verbal de-escalation strategies.

Shulka-Mehta, S., & Albin, R. W. (2003). Twelve practical strategies to prevent behavioral escalation in classroom settings. *Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues, and Ideas*. 77(2), 50-56.

This article promotes a pro-active, positive approach to prevent behavioral escalation in all students. It points out that many students who do not qualify for special education services

nonetheless have strong needs for behavioral interventions for behaviors such as off-task behavior that escalates into arguing and perhaps even injury to property or others. Smita Shukla-Mehta serves as an associate professor in the College of Education and Psychology at the University of Texas at Tyler. Richard W. Albin serves as an associate professor in the Department of Educational and Community Services at the University of Oregon in Eugene. Regarding my topic of verbal de-escalation, the authors discuss counterproductive teacher triggers that serve to further escalate the conflict. They offer practical solutions involving the teacher's verbal reactions, offering the student options and choice, and other sound interventions to de-escalate the conflict.

Wood, M. M., & Long, N. J. (1991). *Life space crisis intervention: talking with children and youth in crisis*. Austin, TX: PRO-ED, Inc.

This book talks in detail about the conflict cycle that begins with a stressful incident, then the student's feelings and anxieties come into play, followed by the student's behavior, then the reactions of adults and peers. Left unchecked, this cycle repeats itself, conflict escalates, and crisis, including violence, may result. The authors offer step-by-step intervention strategies to break the cycle and get the student back on track to resuming the desired activity (e.g., completing their school work). Dr. Mary Margaret Wood is a pioneer leader in the field of Developmental Therapy Curriculum. She has served as an advisor and consultant for the U.S. Department of Education, Head Start, and Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. Dr. Nicholas J. Long is a nationally recognized leader in educating children with emotional and behavioral disorders. He is a professor emeritus of special education at American University in Washington, DC. As it relates to verbal de-escalation, *Life Space Crisis Intervention* offers verbal strategies to break the conflict

cycle. Wood and Long emphasize the importance of adult reactions to students in the conflict cycle. The authors present crisis as an opportunity for teachers to learn, to self-monitor their own destructive involvement in the conflict cycle, and to provide necessary supports for those students in crisis.