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Don't Keep a Good Man Down: Intervention Strategies for Common Causes of Anger and Aggression

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Abstract:

Seclusion and Restraint have been often used as intervention strategies in public schools for many years, and were not limited by law in Kentucky until 2012. 704 KAR 7:160 was the first legislation to respond to dangerous interventions being used in Kentucky's public schools. This presentation summarizes common causes of anger and aggression in our students, and provides research-based strategies for intervention in all three phases of a behavior: antecedent (prior to the behavior, the escalation of a situation), behavior (during the aggressive behavior itself), and consequences (subsequent actions that occur as a response.) The concept is to provide strategies for educators and paraprofessionals to aid in the de-escalation of their student's aggressive behaviors. The importance of this cannot be overstated especially in the area of special education where communication is the key to conquering setbacks. Literature reviewed has offered insight into the prevention of escalation of angry and aggressive behavior by giving students choices between positive action and consequence, maintaining eye level with the student rather than standing in a dominating position, and keeping level and calm tone of voice. Further, literature has suggested that one contemplate the motive behind the behavior and proactively act to prevent further behavior of the aggressor. These and many more verbal and nonverbal actions can aid in the de-escalation or further aggression. However, the art of de-escalation and intervention strategies reach far beyond the field of education. The information presented may also prove beneficial to parents and caregivers, in law enforcement and for other emergency responders as well as in social work.

Causes and Triggers of Aggression:

Situational Stressors

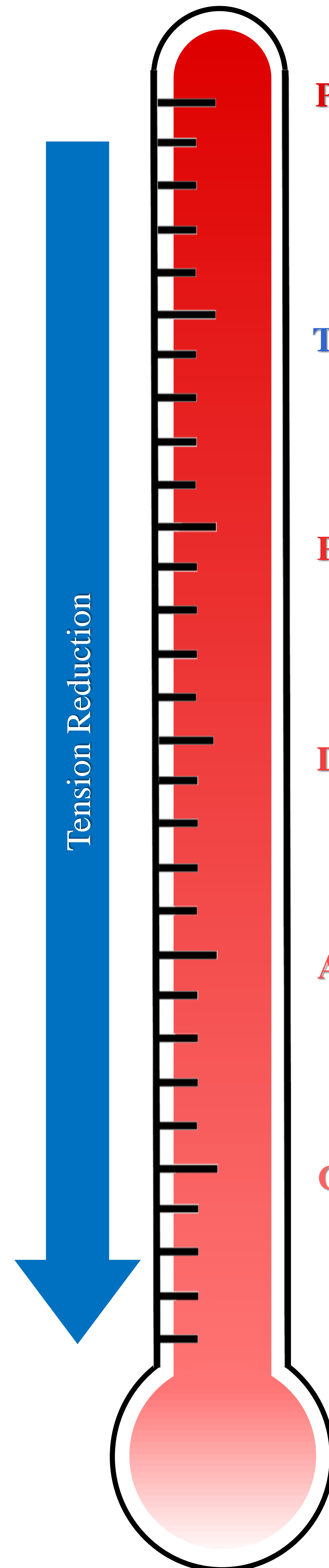
- Verbal Abuse
 - Gossip
 - Cursing/Teasing
 - Abuse from outside the classroom can create tension and anxiety that the student brings into the classroom with them. These can result in aggression.
- Physical Abuse
 - Bullying/Sexual Harassment
 - Bullying and Sexual Harassment, again, outside the classroom will bring anxiety, fear, and stress that can lead to defensiveness and anxiety in the world.
- Undesirable Peer Models/Imitation
 - Poor behavior of others around school, neighborhoods, and home can establish models for aggression and misbehaviors.

Transitional Changes

- Medication
 - An individual may have less control over their defensiveness or have a greater tendency to be aggressive when their medication or natural disposal lead to countering authority with aggression.
- Malnutrition/Sleeplessness
 - Without the proper nutrition and care, angst and stress can increase and lead to aggressive acting out.

Traumatic Events

- Home Issues
 - Family Dysfunction
 - Hostility and distress in the family life, can lead to stressors and anxiety in the classroom.
 - Deployment Related Military Stress
 - Neighborhood Violence
 - Violence in an individual's environment can lead to the normalization of violence and its implementation in the classroom
- Abuse
 - A student may bring anxiety and defensiveness to the classroom if they have experienced stressors related to authority and commands.



Post-Behavior

- Determine the Behavioral Cause
 - Functional Behavior Assessment
 - Understand the Function of Angry and Aggressive Behavior
 - Recognize Triggers

Tension Reduction

- Recommend Breathing Exercises
- Begin Relaxation Exercises
- Prompt the Individual to Visualize a Peaceful State

Physical Acting Out

- Get Help
- Physical Interventions
 - Only when the behavior causes an imminent danger to self or others.

Defensive

- Disconnect from Personal Attacks/Emotional Responses
- Reinforce the Control of Behavior
- Contingency Contract
- Provide Simple, Clear Instructions

Anxiety

- Provide a Supportive Environment
- Choose Words with Care
- Address the Harmful Stimulus and/or Triggers

Calm/Restful

- Practice Relaxation Techniques and Coping Strategies
- Establish Effective Positive Reinforcement Plans

Interventions and Strategies:

- **Determine the Cause of Angry and Aggressive Behavior/Perform Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)** – Use prior experiences and/or data to understand why the behavior occurred and what the person is communicating through their behavior.
- **Recommend Breathing Exercises** - Ask the individual to close their eyes and take deep breathes in through the nose, from the diaphragm and let them go through the mouth. If this seems frustrating, also ask them to notice where the tension in their muscles is strongest and focus on relaxing those muscles (Davis & McKay, 2008).
- **Begin Relaxation Exercises** - Prompt the person to still themselves and focus on their thoughts. Ask them to use their meta cognition to focus on the thoughts that they are having, and repeat a word, or count to three. When a thought comes along, observe it and then think about the repeating. This allows for the analysis of their own aggression as well as releasing tension (Davis & McKay, 2008).
- **Prompt the Individual to Visualize a Peaceful State** - Allow the individual time to visualize a scene in which they prefer to relax. In this scene, visualize all the details and then ask a question like “Why am I angry?” and the answer may appear. It might also be helpful for an individual to visualize themselves calming and try to utilize that relaxation in the current situation (Davis & McKay, 2008).
- **Get Help**-Send or call for assistance.
- **Physical Interventions** - Physical Intervention should only be carried out when less restrictive interventions have not relieved the situation, when the student's ability to communicate is not hindered, and only when there is imminent danger of physical harm to self or others (704 KAR 7:160).
- **Disconnect from Personal Attacks/Emotional Responses** – When communicating with a defensive person avoid exaggerating, lying and distorting. Do not use sarcasm or attempt to get in the last word. Set boundaries but do not set ultimatums or provide consequences at this time. Finally, avoid shouting or raising your voice when a calm clear voice would communicate as effectively (Thompson & Jenkins, 1993).
- **Reinforce the Control of Behavior** – Positively reinforce the ability to control angry and aggressive behavior rather than inadvertently reinforcing the negative behavior (Zirpoli, 2012).
- **Contingency Contract** - A contingency contract is a written behavioral agreement between a student and a teacher regarding the consequences of their behavior and targeting specific productive behaviors. Contingency contracting provides awareness of and reinforcement for constructive behaviors (Wilkinson, 2003).
- **Provide Clear, Simple Instructions** – Calmly present the defensive individual with clear and specific directions regarding what to do. Providing the individual with choices of positive and negative consequences, allows him or her the ability to take responsibility for their behavior.
- **Provide a Supportive Environment** - Anxious individuals respond most positively to people who demonstrate empathy, genuineness, and warmth in both their environment and the way they communicate (Wampold, 2011).
- **Choose Words with Care** – To effectively communicate during a crisis, one should continuously evaluate a person's progress and their needs with genuineness and authenticity (Wampold, 2011).
- **Address the Harmful Stimulus** – A behavior does not occur within a vacuum, rather it is a reaction to a stimulus. Address that stimulus to allow de-escalation.
- **Practice Relaxation Techniques and Coping Strategies** - Talk about what happens when situations escalate and its mental and physical effects on the individual.
 - Rehearse breathing, relaxation, and visualization techniques that can be used to calm him or her (McKay & Rogers, 2000).
- **Establish an Effective Reinforcement Plan** - Positively and consistently reinforce targeted behaviors in all environments schools wide (Benner, Nelson, Sanders, and Ralston, 2012).

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