De-escalating Intense Behavior
Part Two

Presented by Dr. Rona Novick, PhD
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Today’s Agenda:

1. Reactions and Consequences
   • Traditional responses and their limitations

2. When Intense Behavior Happens
   • Understanding stages of intensification
   • De-escalating responses
Considering Factors the Contribute to Behavior Change

• Behavior is strengthened/maintained by positive consequences
• Behavior is weakened by withholding/altering consequences (usually social) that have maintained it
• Behavior can also be strengthened, weakened, or maintained by modeling

Rina constantly taps her pencil to get the teacher’s attention. Instead of scolding her, teacher tells another student sitting quietly that she is really pleased with her attentiveness. How did this weaken/strengthen behaviors?

Jenny’s mom says “thank you” every time she is served in a restaurant. Jenny says “thank you” every time she is served lunch at school. How did Jenny learn to say thank you?
Consider this scenario:

- Joshua has grabbed another student’s notebook and is running around the room taunting him.
- What would be a traditional response?

- Focus on student as the problem
- Reactive in nature
- Focus form of behavior (rather than function)
- Oriented toward short-term changes
- Punishment without positive support system results in increased aggression, vandalism, truancy, dropouts (Mayer & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1999)
Traditional Consequences for Addressing Problems

Let’s consider typical responses to Joshua’s behavior.

Which of these options might be used in your setting? What do you expect would be the outcome? What are the drawbacks of these traditional consequences?

• Removal from room/sent to office
• Time out
• Demerit or fine
• Detention
• Writing assignment
• Call home

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Why Traditional Consequences Do Not Work

- Not aligned with function of behavior, student may escape what they want to avoid or may obtain desired attention/activity/item
- Student is not taught replacement skill/desired behavior
- May agitate student
- More use = less effect
- May embarrass the student
- Student/Teacher Relationship affected
- Can not always be immediate
Effective Application of Consequences

- Consequences reasonable and logical
- Consequences preplanned and posted
- Hierarchy of consequences for rule violations - what matters most
- Consequences explained and regularly reviewed - at times of low emotion
- Consequences delivered consistently and in a timely manner and with caring affect

- How could these guidelines be applied to Joshua’s behavior?

- Consider Ruth. She refused to do an assignment. Became more angry in her statements to the teacher as requests were repeated. Moved to the door of the room. Threatened to leave the room, and eventually went into hall and slammed door. How could these guidelines be applied to Ruth’s behavior?
When Intense Behavior Happens
General Guidelines

- Protection not punishment (safety first – including yours)
- Avoid competitive approach
- Calm – nonviolent responses to violence
- Know who is in charge – if multiple adults are present
- Process after the fact
- Keep processing – watch for delayed reactions
Stages of Intense Behavior

- **Stage 1 – Mild behavior, support needed**
- **Stage 2 – Moderate escalation, directive approach**
- **Stage 3 – Intense behavior – De-escalating intervention needed**
- **Stage 4 – Re-grouping – Rebuilding rapport necessary**

- Can you tell what stage you’re in?
- Ruth was asked to complete her Ivrit assignment at her desk. Her first response was to say it was a dumb assignment and she didn’t want to do it. Besides, her hand hurt and it would require a lot of writing. Mrs. Cohen, circulating in the classroom, helped clarify the task for Ruth, and asked her to get started. Ruth’s voice increased in volume as she complained about the “stupid” assignment and loudly proclaimed “you can’t make me do it”. Mrs. Cohen reminded the class that the rules of the class require work finished before recess, and walked to Ruth to discuss how she might complete the task. Ruth moved to the door and threatened to leave the room. Within seconds she went into hall, slamming the door behind her.
The Case of Sam

- Sam is a charming, adorable, 3rd grader, who is large for his age. He generally enjoys English subjects in school, and complains that Hebrew/Judaic studies subjects are “boring”, but seems to struggle more with them. He is usually pleasant and cooperative. He likes to get his work done quickly, and enjoys recognition for correct responses. He will often ask for help on seemingly easy tasks, concerned that he may not understand the directions.

- At recess, Sam plays dodge ball, and is very energetic, and skilled. He has become upset when his fellow players miss a shot. Twice this year, he has been asked to leave recess because he almost came to blows with a peer during the game.

- In class, Sam is not always chosen by others as a partner. When he works in groups, he can become frustrated with his peers. When upset, his voice quickly becomes loud, and his motor activity increases. It is not uncommon for him to pace the classroom or rip papers when he is angered. Classmates do seem to enjoy his sense of humor, especially when he tells jokes, or shares magic tricks that he has learned.

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- What might you expect are Sam’s triggers? Slow, fast, or situational?
- What behaviors might have been learned through modeling? Which may not have been learned through modeling?
- What teacher words or actions might escalate Sam?
Going Through The Stages

• Sam begins the school day seemingly distracted and a bit out of sorts. He takes a while to start his work.

• A fellow student walks past Sam and knocks something off his desk. Sam screams “leave me alone” and stands to confront the peer.

• The peer doesn’t move and Sam screams “get away from me, freak, I’m going to punch you”. Sam begins pacing around the room, rips items off the bulletin board, and throws books off the shelves.
Responding Across the Stages

- Sam begins the school day seemingly distracted and a bit out of sorts. He takes a while to start his work.

Teacher, yelling from across the room, tells Sam to get started.

Teacher walks to Sam’s desk. Asks how he is doing. Asks if he needs support to get started. Arranges a plan.
A fellow student walks past Sam and knocks something off his desk. Sam screams “leave me alone” and stands to confront the peer.

Teacher calls to Sam across room telling him to sit down immediately or there will be big trouble.

Teacher walks to Sam and asks if he can follow the plan they agreed on earlier. Asks if Sam would like different workspace, or other support. Focuses Sam on the task at hand.
• The peer doesn’t move and Sam screams “get away from me, freak, I’m going to punch you”. Sam begins pacing around the room, rips items off the bulletin board, and throws books off the shelves.

Teacher yells at Sam to leave the room and go to the office.

Teacher walks near Sam and calmly explains that she cannot have things in the room destroyed, but she also wants Sam to feel safe. Offers that if Sam is having a hard time being safe in the room, or following class rules, perhaps he would like some time to calm down in the hallway.
De-Escalating Words

- Language is very powerful
- Paraverbal communication also critical – inflection, tone, volume, cadence
  - “Is anything bothering you” – can be support, sarcasm, insult, etc.
- Calming words include:
  - Questions, validation, wondering, joining
- Escalating words include:
  - Threats, demands, critiques

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De-Escalating Body Language

• Only 10-15% of messages we give to another person is verbal, the remainder comes from our body language

• Consider the last time you were confronting a student’s intense behavior. Stand-up and walk towards that student as if you are going to speak to him/her. Freeze! Where is your weight focused?
Non-confrontative Stance

- Kick back – have your weight on your rear foot
- Angled body presentation – less threatening and protects you
- Hands low and open
- Respect personal space – this varies by person, culture and age
The Critical Stage – Re-connecting

• Think of a time you were engaged with a student with intense behavior.
• Afterwards . . . What did you do and what did you feel?
• How did your feeling impact what you did then and in the next few hours/days with the student?
• What would Sam need after his difficulty?
• What might his teacher need?

• Relationship and students’ awareness that adults care for them is critical in establishing calm, productive classrooms
• Intense behavior and reaction to it often creates distance in relationship
• Adult must re-connect
  - Look for any positive step and congratulate
  - Wait before processing event
  - Find way to re-integrate student

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The Personal Factor

- Teachers may feel under personal attack when intense behavior occurs.

- If you take it personally, your tension level increases.

- If you take it personally, risk failing to see the student as struggling vs. deliberate and destructive.
Teacher’s Tension Reduction

• Why is this important
  • Your own “tension barrel”
• Understanding your triggers
  • Adults have much more flexibility than students – can rearrange to mediate a trigger
• Managing your arousal
  • Same techniques you teach your students may be useful for you!
• Keeping cool in low level situations
• Keeping cool in high level situations
• Creating your personal chill out plan
Comments and Questions
Upcoming Hidden Sparks Without Walls Sessions

The Role of Memory in School Success- Nov 18., Nov. 25
with Claire Wurtzel

Language, Learning and Literacy – Dec. 3, Dec. 10
with Claire Wurtzel

Course on Attention – Dec. 9, Dec. 16
with Naomi Weiss
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