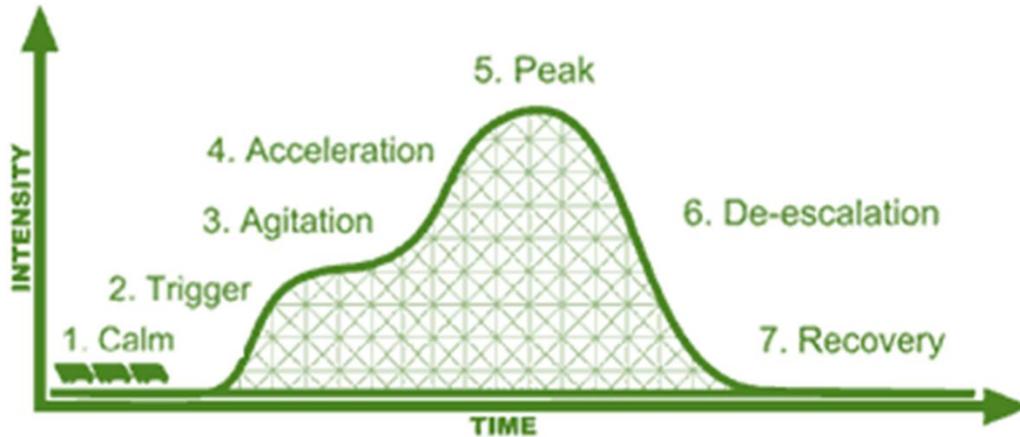


Understanding the Acting Out Cycle

You will be better prepared to effectively intervene to prevent or minimize student outbursts by knowing the phases of the **Acting Out Cycle** and the teacher actions that work best for each phase. The acting out cycle is the very predictable pattern of escalating student behaviors, from calm, to agitation, to peak outburst, to de-escalation.



When thinking of the acting out cycle, it is helpful to think of a rider's ascent to the peak of a roller coaster. The emotion fueled peak on the rollercoaster is typically what first comes to mind when teachers recall a particularly difficult experience of student behavior in the classroom. But what is often missing from this perspective is the long climb to the peak of behavioral escalation. The cycle demonstrates the often slow escalation of student misbehavior.

Behavioral escalation can begin with emotional triggers that could have happened before school, during a previous class or at recess, or during the current class. An understanding of the early stages of the acting out cycle help teachers to identify points of behavioral intervention before a full-on outburst occurs.

When teachers and schools can provide consistent, positive support to students, chronic cycles of acting out behaviors can be broken. When teachers understand and respond to challenging classroom behaviors in positive and proactive ways, students with historical patterns disruptive behavior will begin to re-orient their relationships with teachers and with school. This is change happens incrementally through daily interactions.

As the acting out cycle illustrates, students display signs of increasing agitation long before a major emotional outburst occurs:

- balling up fists
- intense fidgeting
- withdrawing from classroom interaction
- clenching jaw
- avoiding eye contact
- changes in tone of voice

Many educators tend to ignore students' increasing signs of agitation, hoping they'll eventually calm down if ignored. *However, when these more minor behavioral signals of agitation are ignored, the most likely outcome is that the student becomes increasingly dysregulated and can escalate their attention seeking behaviors.*

Understanding that emotional and behavioral outbursts have predictable patterns with a long lead up to the peak point of escalation is the first step to effectively using preventative de-escalation.

Overview of the Acting Out Cycle with Opportunities for Intervention

	Student Behaviors	Effective Teacher Actions
Calm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaged in instruction • Adhering to classroom social and behavioral expectations • Displaying acceptable classroom behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide positive attention • Work on developing relationships with children • Provide safe, calm environment
Trigger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Triggers can be social, cognitive, emotional or physiological • Classroom stimulus (interpersonal conflict, cognitive frustration, social pressure) provokes a trauma response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin to recognize what triggers are and help to prevent them • Change the setting, social interactions • Offer positive attention
Agitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Off-task behaviors • Difficulty with concentration • Physical signs of agitation such as tapping, rocking, "spacing out" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redirect child • Change the way the child is working on the activity—offer choices • Provide assistance and offer calming techniques
Acceleration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student seeks teacher's attention in negative ways • Inconsistent compliance with redirection • Attempts to provoke teacher and other students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calmly redirect to appropriate behavior • Acknowledge feelings and give positive attention • Make high-probability requests • Do not engage in argument, use sarcasm, or offer negative remarks
Peak	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student escalates to their maximum behavior • Displays of verbal and sometimes physical aggression • Can be potentially dangerous for others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure safety for everyone in the classroom including the escalated student. • Stay calm and maintain safety • Help child to regain control in respectful, caring way
De-escalation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student becomes disoriented or confused • Withdraws emotionally • Becomes more receptive to teacher redirection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move child to Quiet Corner • Provide calm independent activity • Check on rest of class to restore order • Request support from other adults and administrators when needed
Recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student calms down • May avoid talking about the incident 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debriefing of incident is critical • Discuss what triggered incident and make plan for prevention in future

De-escalation micro-learning briefs are archived at [TREPeducator.org/deescalation](https://trepeducator.org/deescalation). Please access and review previous briefs as needed.