

Trauma Responsive De-Escalation

*Evidence-Based Strategies
That Work in the Classroom*

**An easy-to-learn framework for
supporting students experiencing
behavioral dysregulation**

Plus a Comprehensive Classroom Management Template

Micere Keels, PhD

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Intro to Trauma Responsive De-Escalation

Externalizing and escalating behaviors such as classroom outbursts, verbal jabs, or even physical attacks derail instruction and can compromise the safety of students and educators.¹ As such, issues of externalizing classroom behaviors are at the top of most educators' concerns.

This sequenced set of micro-learning lessons on Trauma Responsive De-Escalation will equip you with a toolbox of de-escalation strategies that have been shown effective in addressing challenging student behavior.

If the underlying cause of outbursts and escalating behavior is trauma and the resultant distress and dysregulation, what looks like an intentional disruption of the learning environment, may stem from the student feeling a lack of emotional, psychological, or physical safety.² Punitive discipline will only make the student feel more unsafe and intensify the behavior.

Common educator reactions to challenging student behaviors such as calling out the student's name, public reprimands, or punishment threats ultimately escalate rather than de-escalate student behavior.³ To counter this, a trauma responsive educator recognizes a student's pattern of acting-out behavior and escalation and intervenes early to support the student with self-regulation, calming strategies, and by offering ways to separate, physically or emotionally, from the triggering situation.⁴

“We don't get to decide whether we have challenging students in our classes, but we can certainly decide how we respond to them.”

~ Carol Ann Tomlinson

Students who have a history of frequent engagement with unsupportive environments outside of school often also have a history of defeating school experiences. These defeating experiences at school compound over time and result in reinforcing cycles of negative relationships and expectations between educators and students.

This negative cycle can be broken when educators and schools provide consistent positive support to students. Such support is provided incrementally through the day-to-day interactions that students have with their educators. When educators understand and respond with trauma responsive discipline, students will begin to re-orient their relationships with educators and school.⁵

Trauma responsive discipline prioritizes maintaining student dignity and ensuring that disciplinary interactions strengthen students' self-regulation capacities. *The term trauma responsive frames the goal as moving from being emotionally reactive to being developmentally responsive to the needs of students coping with trauma.*

Educators are reactive when their actions are determined by emotions that are triggered by a student's behavior. When this occurs, the reaction is often much more intense and punitive than is warranted by the immediate situation. Alternatively, educators are responsive when their actions engage their knowledge about trauma in ways that enable them to separate their triggered emotions from the developmentally supportive responses they display to students.⁶ They can then focus on pedagogical practices that can help students build their coping and self-regulation skills.⁷

BENEFITS OF PREVENTATIVE DE-ESCALATION
Benefits for the Student
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Preventative de-escalation helps build educator-student relationships. Done well, students will feel heard and respected and may also come away from the experience having learned self-regulating behaviors they can use when feeling agitated in the future.• When successful, students stay in the classroom, are quickly re-engaged in learning, and are kept out of a punitive cycle that may decrease their school belonging.
Benefits for the Classroom Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• De-escalation serves as a lesson for all students in the classroom. Being a witness to an interaction where an educator listens to and responds to the needs of a fellow student, builds trust and feelings of safety throughout the entire classroom community.
Benefits for the Educator
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engaging in preventative de-escalation can improve your overall effectiveness, minimize workload, and promote personal wellbeing. By building trust, teaching expected behaviors, and establishing an emotionally supportive classroom, you will be able to spend less time on behavior management.

Understanding Trauma and Its Effects on Development

It is important to keep in mind that trauma is not the event itself, but the psychological and emotional wounds that linger after the traumatic event has passed. When children do not have supportive adults in their lives to teach them how to cope with and make sense of tragic events, they will go through life with unhealed wounds. Similarly, when trauma is chronic, and children do not have time to heal from one traumatic event before the next traumatic event happens, they become traumatized. Because trauma and the resulting loss of feelings of safety and wellbeing disrupts children's abilities to regulate their emotions and behaviors, they often respond to small classroom frustrations with defiant, aggressive, withdrawn, or avoidant behaviors.

The harm that trauma causes does not have to be permanent. Children are malleable and adaptive: with the right developmental supports they can heal, and post-traumatic growth is possible. Traumatic experiences, especially when they are chronic, may affect the **seven domains of impairment** described below. Understanding these domains of impairment can help you make sense of the emotional and behavioral challenges that children display.

BRAIN & BODY: Repeated exposure to traumatic experiences interferes with the basic development and connections among neurons in the brain. Chronic exposure to traumatic stress also interferes with the integration of left and right hemisphere brain functioning, which makes it difficult to access rational thought when faced with distressing emotions. Chronic activation of their stress hormones may also cause a wide variety of medical problems, such as body pain, asthma, skin problems, autoimmune disorders, and pseudoseizures.

ATTACHMENT: When children are placed in situations where they are forced to take responsibility for their own safety, particularly when their caregiver is the source of trauma, they attempt to exert some control by emotionally disconnecting from people or by acting aggressively to keep people away. This may lead children to always be on the lookout for others who may threaten their safety; withholding their own emotions from others, and never letting people see when they are afraid, sad, hurt, or angry.

EMOTIONAL REGULATION: Children coping with trauma are easily aroused and express high-intensity emotions due to their low stress tolerance or a high anxiety level. Their inability to identify the cause of their internal states of high arousal and anxiety, and then apply appropriate emotional labels to what they are feeling can make them feel out of control. Because they have difficulty self-regulating and self-soothing, they may display chronic numbing of emotions, pervasive depressed mood, and avoidance of negative and positive emotional situations.

BEHAVIORAL REGULATION: Both under-controlled behaviors (such as aggressive or defiant behavior) and over-controlled behaviors (such as resistance to changes in routine) can develop as a way of coping with overwhelming stress and loss of safety. Children may appear to be self-destructive, aggressive toward others, or they may appear to be over compliant.

DISSOCIATION: Dissociation is disconnection from one’s own thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations. Dissociation begins as a protective mechanism in the face of overwhelming trauma. Chronic trauma exposure may lead to an over-reliance on dissociation as a coping mechanism, which then creates other behavioral and emotional regulation problems. This can lead to engaging in repetitive self-soothing behaviors without conscious choice or self-awareness. Dissociation makes it difficult to concentrate in the classroom and remember academic content.

THINKING & LEARNING: Because of impairment in the other domains, traumatized children show significant delays in expressive and receptive language development, abstract reasoning, problem solving, sustaining curiosity and attention, and retaining and recalling information.

SELF-CONCEPT: Having a safe and predictable environment and caregivers that are responsive and sensitive allow children to develop a sense of themselves as valued, worthy, and competent. Additionally, because of impairment in the other domains, traumatized children develop low self-esteem, low academic self-efficacy, intense shame and guilt, and learned helplessness.

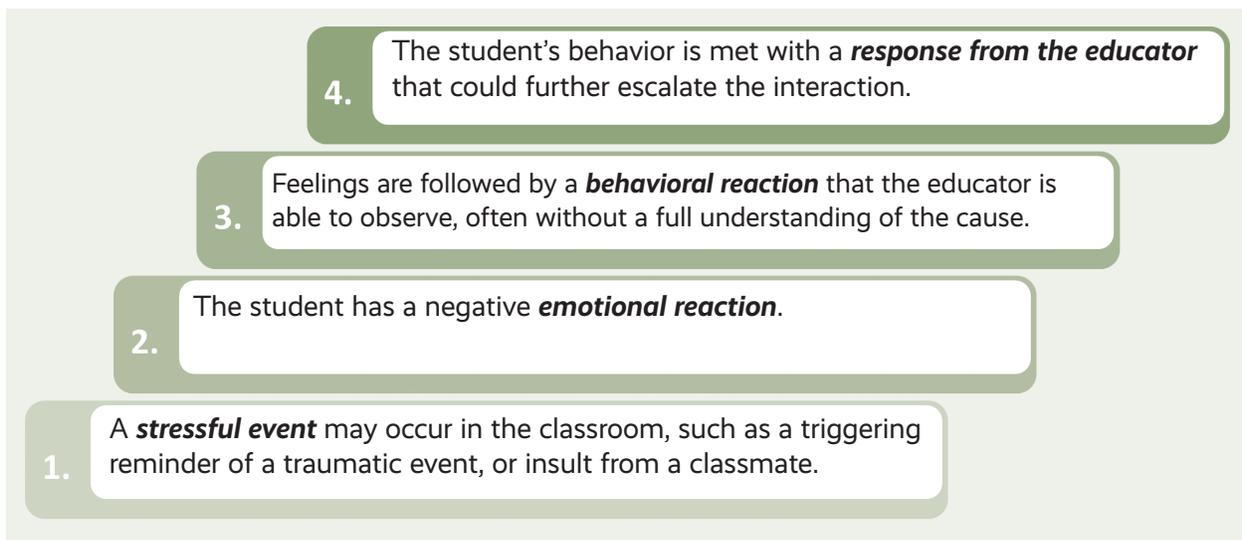
Hyperarousal in the classroom may be seen in the following types of behaviors:	Hypoarousal in the classroom may be seen in the following types of behaviors:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to remain quiet or seated • Tension, irritability, and impatience • Angry outbursts and aggression • Exaggerated startle response • Defiance • Impulsivity • Hypervigilance and perceiving ambiguous events as threatening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daydreaming, “spacing out” • Forgetting material previously learned • Not processing material just discussed • Lethargy, sleeping in class • Lack of motivation, low engagement • Procrastination • Hyperfocused on an activity to the exclusion of all others around

These impairments show up in their behavior at school in a range of ways that can make it difficult for them to meet classroom expectations. Their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are ruled by their stress response systems (their feeling brain) rather than by their cortex (their thinking brain). These children can appear to be either **hyperaroused** (hyperactive and over-reactive) or **hypoaroused**

LESSON 2

Proactively Interrupt the Conflict Cycle

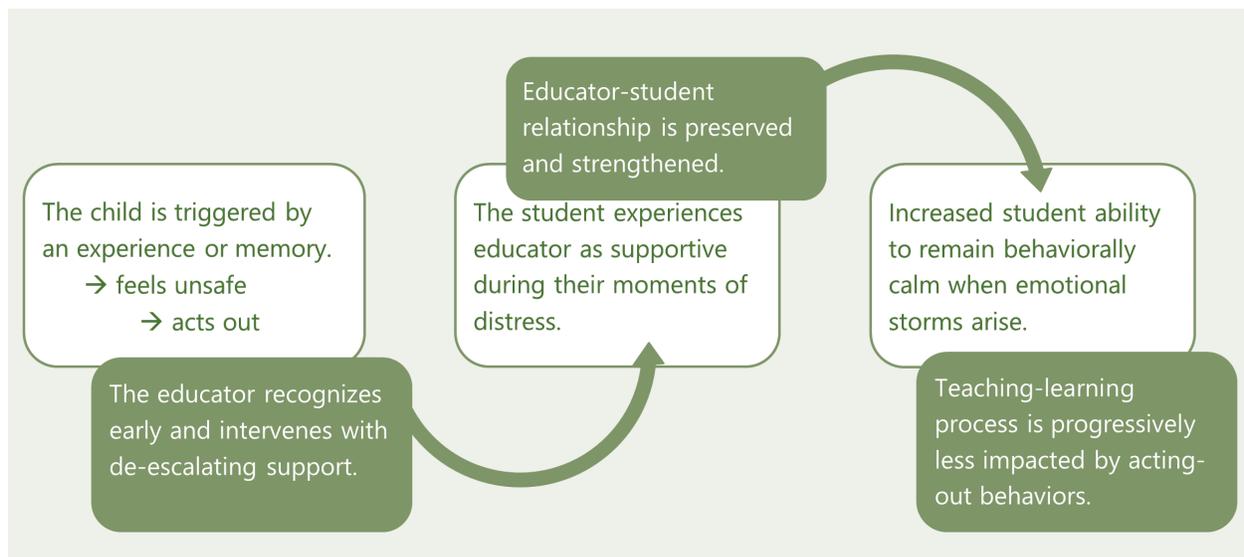
Let's spend some time on prevention before moving into focusing on student behaviors and what to do in the midst of an escalating interaction. Educators and students each bring something to their initial interactions. The experiences and perceptions of each other that result from those initial interactions can create a downward or upward spiral of reciprocal interactions. Heading off a damaging cycle of negative interactions is crucial because research shows that students' challenging behaviors such as being aggressive, angry, anxious, asocial, dependent, and defiant are significantly more impactful on educator-student relationships than exhibiting positive and prosocial behaviors.



The Conflict Cycle has four distinct phases that describes educator-student escalating interaction.

This type of ineffective and escalating management of acting-out behaviors can be one of the largest barriers to a positive and productive classroom environment during instructional time.⁹ **Educators who can anticipate and adjust their role in escalating student behaviors are equipped with important classroom management skills.**

As shown in the figure below, the choices that educators make in their interactions with students can either contribute to escalating student behaviors or be supportive in reducing and preventing escalation. Learning how to proactively interrupt the conflict cycle at critical moments is one more strategy to add to your toolbox.



To support students coping with trauma, educators need a toolbox of practices that will enable them to¹⁰:

- ✓ Read and respond to children's emotional states as signaled by their behavior.
- ✓ Offer acceptance and warmth as well as accurate and appropriate feedback.
- ✓ Support children in learning how to tolerate frustration during the learning process.
- ✓ Provide limits on the boundaries of acceptable behavior while providing space for individual expression.

The table on the next page provides several strategies that you can utilize when you notice that a student is becoming agitated.

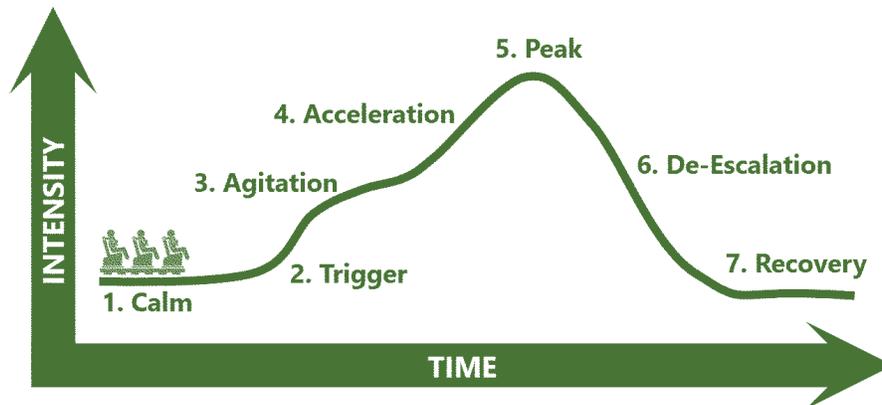
Strategies for Reducing Student Agitation

<p>SET LIMITS</p>	<p>Set limits that are clear, simple, and enforceable. Offering acceptable and respectful choices and consequences remind the student of the boundaries and let them know they are safe.</p>
<p>COACH</p>	<p>Coach the student in moderating their own behavior. E.g., “It’s hard for me to understand what you need when you are raising your voice and slamming things. If you would take a breath and calmly tell me what you’re trying to say, I think I can help.”</p>
<p>CONNECT</p>	<p>Identify some point of agreement or understanding while reinforcing expectations. E.g., “I can see how you would be upset by...” or “I bet other students would feel the same way if...” or “A better way of handling it so you won’t get in trouble and no one gets hurt, is...” This builds rapport and preserves your role as a guide or helper.</p>
<p>SET A GOAL</p>	<p>Frame an outcome goal. This reassures the student and can help to diffuse agitation. In some cases, this will help to reinforce the message that you are not the enemy. E.g., “I’m trying to help you stay out of trouble,” or “I just want you and the other students to stay safe,” or “I want you to get what you need, but in a way that works for everybody.”</p>
<p>TAKE SOLACE IN SILENCE</p>	<p>Allow space for silence as it can slow things down and give you and the student a chance to reflect on what is happening. It can help you regain composure and self-control. It also gives the student time for calming and decision-making: When a student is upset, they may not be able to think clearly. Give them a few moments to think through what you have said and time to make a choice.</p>
<p>LIMIT ADULTS RESPONDING</p>	<p>Limit the number of adults involved at one time. This aids in avoiding mixed messages being sent while helping the child feel less of a need to defend themselves. If there is more than one adult, one should be engaged with the agitated student and the other should attend to the needs of the other students, such as giving them a task to work on or simply distracting their attention from the intense situation and reassuring their safety.</p>

LESSON 3

The Predictable Pattern of Student Acting-Out Behavior

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 educator's 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 helps 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 educators 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.

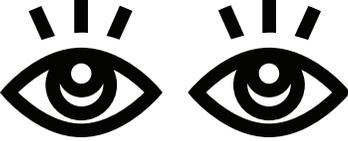
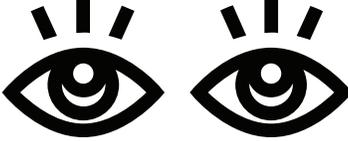
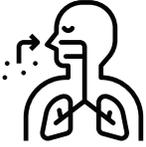
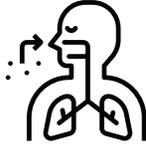
Behavioral escalation can begin with triggers that could have happened before school, during a previous class or at recess, or during the current class. Understanding the early stages of the Acting-Out Cycle helps educators identify points of behavioral intervention before a full-on outburst occurs.

When educators and schools can provide consistent, positive support to students, chronic cycles of acting-out behaviors can be broken. When educators understand and respond to challenging classroom behaviors in positive and proactive ways, students with historical patterns of disruptive behavior will begin to reorient their relationships with educators and school. This 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

Supportive Cards for Attending to Student Agitation During Whole-Group Instruction

 I see you and I want to help.			 I see you and I want to help.		
 I need a few minutes to finish up. I will come talk to you soon.			 I need a few minutes to finish up. I will come talk to you soon.		
Try these strategies to help, until I can come talk to you.			Try these strategies to help, until I can come talk to you.		
					
Color or Draw	Think Happy Thoughts	Take Deep Breaths	Color or Draw	Think Happy Thoughts	Take Deep Breaths
					
Set a Timer, Take a Break	Read a Book That You Like	Look At Nature Photos	Set a Timer, Take a Break	Read a Book That You Like	Look At Nature Photos
		10, 9, 8, 7 ...			10, 9, 8, 7 ...
Write Numbers Backwards From 10	Get a Quick Drink of Water	Count Slowly Backwards From 10	Write Numbers Backwards From 10	Get a Quick Drink of Water	Count Slowly Backwards From 10

Comprehensive Classroom Management Planning Template

**Classroom management planning that attends to the needs
of students coping with trauma**

Comprehensive Classroom Management Planning Template

Consistency is important for all children, but it is crucial for those coping with trauma and high levels of stress. Expectations, rules, procedures, rewards, and consequences should be consistent from educator to educator and throughout all school settings. Children coping with trauma need to experience consistent rules throughout the school. Consistency at school will allow these children to differentiate between arbitrary rules, which they may be subject to in their lives outside of school, and purposeful ones. Children coping with trauma are hypersensitive to whether the rules apply to all students and are equitably enforced.²²

Consider these tips as you prepare your comprehensive classroom management plan. Revise your plan every few years as you change, your students change, the school changes, and the community changes.

Some aspects of consistency should occur at the level of the whole school, such as three to five school-wide behavioral expectations that apply to all spaces and actions throughout the school. Some aspects of consistency are more specific to a given classroom, such as two to three classroom-specific rules that complement the school-wide ones.

Frequent reminders of expectations and routines that are provided in varied formats are helpful behavioral aids that are especially supportive for students coping with trauma. When expectations and routines are consistent and predictable, the likelihood of them being adhered to greatly increases. Failing to meet behavioral expectations often does not stem from willful defiance; it is also due to a lack of skills that need to be developed to successfully meet expectations.

Of course, schedule changes do happen. Here are a few tips for helping students manage temporary changes in the planned schedule:

- Whenever possible, post visible schedules, expectations, and reference charts of routines for students to locate a reminder when needed.
- Nothing should come as a surprise, even if that is giving students at least a five to ten-minute warning, coupled with a quick explanation of the “planned” schedule change.
- Ideally, inform students a day in advance, and remind them during the hours and minutes before they will experience the change.

Your comprehensive classroom management plan should contain what is expected of yourself and of all students, and it should include as many elements related to safety as possible.

Tips for Creating Consistency and Predictability for Students

Students who are coping with trauma and high levels of stress have low levels of frustration tolerance and can quickly become dysregulated or respond poorly to inconsistent expectations and unexpected changes.

Consistently repeat with variation. Have a morning-welcome activity or post-lunch brain teaser on the board before students enter the classroom. Make it predictable, consistent, and clear by placing it on the schedule and projecting the instructions on the board each time. This activates learning as soon as students enter the room and reduces classroom-management challenges at the beginning of class.

Consistently use mindfulness to build their frustration tolerance. Make sure to utilize brief mindfulness practices in the classroom on a planned and predictable basis to help develop students' self-regulation and self-calming skills that they can use during times of stress.

Do not set expectations you cannot consistency enforce. Whether you are making rules or promises or setting the consequences for not following the guidelines, do not set any expectations that you cannot or will not consistently enforce. You have to be consistent if you want your students to consistently follow your rules.

Consistently praise efforts. Acknowledge and reward students when they exhibit the expected behaviors, and make sure to include students who attempt to exhibit these behaviors but may not be 100 percent successful. You have to consistently recognize and reward students for following classroom rules and procedures; otherwise, they will learn that they only get attention from you when they are breaking the rules.

When you need to make unexpected changes, give many warnings for the quickly upcoming change and guide students through the change. For example:

First prompt: "When math prep is over, instead of transitioning into our reading groups, we will go to an assembly."

Second prompt: "We have five minutes left in math prep and then instead of reading groups, we will go to the assembly."

Third prompt: "Math prep is over, please put your math books in your desk and line up at the door so we can go to the assembly."

When you do this, the ***change feels predictable.***

Three to Five Classroom Behavioral Expectations

Positively state all expectations. Focus on the behavior you want to see that is the replacement for the behavior you do not want. Expectations are more likely to be followed when you can explain why the expectation exists and how it is helpful for the student, class, and educator.

Create broad expectations that are then connected with examples of what it looks like in behavior.

- Be safe: Walk at all times in the classroom, sit in the center of the seat with all chair legs on the floor.
- Be respectful: Do your best to follow the rules and instructions the first time.

How will you engage students in collectively creating and agreeing to the expectations?	
Expectation No. 1:	
Clearly state the expectation.	
What does this look like in behavior?	
What is the reason for this rule? Why is it helpful?	
What is the supportive consequence for not meeting this expectation?	<i>After using supportive and teaching strategies like proximity, eye contact, redirection, and stating the replacement behavior.</i>

Classroom Procedures for Common Tasks

These are clear expectations and routines that you will teach to students for how they will manage themselves in your classroom. State the procedures that students are expected to follow.

Tardy students	<i>Enter quietly, place tardy slip/pass in basket, quietly put items away without disturbing others, sit down and join lesson/assignment, raise hand and wait if assistance is needed.</i>
Turning in homework	<i>Have a designated location for homework to be returned and collected, perhaps by table groups such as a basket or folder for each table that one student then collects and places near your desk.</i>
Access to lesson and homework for students who missed class	<i>Provide a folder or basket with past assignments in a designated location.</i>
Turning in late assignments	<i>Providing a basket or folder for students to turn in late assignments privately without shaming increases safety for taking academic risks.</i>
Talking with peers	<i>Establish voice levels, practice what each level means such as 0 being silent, 1 a whisper, 2 indoor voices, and times when each voice level should be used.</i>
Moving around the class without asking for permission	<i>State the exceptions to the raise-your-hand rule. Model an example: quietly getting up, doing directly to the water fountain, and quickly returning without interrupting others.</i>

Externalizing behaviors in the classroom and their connection to trauma are at the top of most educators' concerns. Children who have experienced trauma may express their distress through acting-out behaviors such as defiance, emotional outbursts, verbal jabs, and even physical attacks. These behaviors can derail instruction and compromise classroom safety. Common educator reactions, such as sharply calling out the student's name, threatening punishment, or sending them out of the classroom, often escalate rather than de-escalate the behavior.

When the underlying cause of acting-out behaviors is trauma—such as chronic poverty, hunger, abuse, domestic violence, gun violence, parental incarceration, or suddenly losing a loved one—what appears to be intentional disruption of the learning environment may be due to the student feeling a lack of emotional, psychological, or physical safety. Punitive discipline will only make the student feel more anxious and unsafe, intensifying their acting-out behaviors.

Learning to utilize trauma responsive de-escalation practices enables educators to understand the underlying causes of acting-out behaviors and consistently provide developmentally supportive responses. With these supports, students will begin to shift their relationships and behaviors with educators in positive and prosocial ways.

This book contains 15 easy-to-follow de-escalation lessons coupled with a comprehensive classroom management planning workbook. Trauma responsive de-escalation, asks you to respond to challenging behaviors in ways that are:

- Proactive, by identifying triggers and planning preventative actions.
- Positive, by focusing on behavioral redirection and specifying the behaviors you want students to display.
- Relational, by offering brief rationale for rules rather than relying on fear-based compliance.
- Instructional, by ensuring that each discipline interaction is also a learning experience that strengthens self-regulation skills.

Whether you are new to the profession or a veteran educator, this guide will help you strengthen your classroom management practices.

Dr. Micere Keels is an Associate Professor at the University of Chicago, and the Founding Director of the Trauma Responsive Educational Practices Project (TREP Project). For over two decades, she has worked to integrate mental health promotion interventions into educational systems and structures, from early childhood centers to high schools. The TREP Project works to develop the individual and organizational capacity of educators and schools serving children growing up in neighborhoods that have high levels of toxic stress, such as violent crime, concentrated poverty, concentrated foster care involvement, and housing instability. Through this work, she has learned that when educators are supported in building their toolbox of strategies, they can create transformative learning environments for students coping with trauma. More resources for educators can be found at TREPeducator.org

She is also the author of the just released [Your Guide to Educator Self-Care](#).

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