

# Techniques for Avoiding Counteraggressive Responses When Teaching Youth with Aggressive Behaviors

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*This article describes strategies to counteract aggressive responses when students exhibit aggressive behaviors. Promising practices include the conflict cycle, self-management, components of life space interviewing, anger replacement training, and relationship technology.*



## Brigitte's Story Is Everyone's Story

A first-year teacher and recent graduate of our undergraduate teacher training program at Rivier College came back to see me the other day after a rather long and difficult week of teaching. "What's wrong, Brigitte?" I asked. "I'm trying so hard to do what you've taught me," she explained, "but I couldn't stop myself today, and I feel bad." Brigitte had been hired as a special education teacher with adolescent students who were relationship reluctant. The middle school where she taught is in a poverty stricken area of Massachusetts. "What happened?" I asked. "I yelled at them today. I tried not to, but I couldn't help myself. I know that yelling back doesn't help, and I know

*Drawing by Doug Sciorra, 18-year-old student at Steuben-Allegany BOCES, Hornell, New York.*

what to do now, but I just lost control for a moment.” “That’s teaching,” I replied. “Let’s talk about what you need to know and practice beforehand as well as what you’ll do when it happens again.”

Brigitte’s story is not reserved for first-year teachers. Increasingly, teachers are being confronted with students whose behavior is aggressive or violent in nature. Youth violence is at an all-time high. Schools, like the society they mirror, have become increasingly dangerous and unsafe for both students and teachers. Felgar (1992) describes the new popularity of gangs, weapons, violence, and crime in schools as the biggest problem and frustration facing school officials today. According to the National Crime Survey, close to three million attempted or completed crimes of assault, rape, robbery, or theft occurred inside schools or on school property (Juvenile Justice Bulletin, 1989). Weitzel (1989) reports that weapons were used in acts of violence perpetrated in schools in more than 70,000 instances during the 1986-87 school year alone! Sadly, children and adolescents are more likely to get attacked in schools than in any other environment.

Teachers and other helping professionals are also at risk. A survey conducted by the American Federation of Teachers and reported by Harper (1989) revealed that almost three-quarters of all teachers were extremely concerned about an increase in violent behavior and gang membership in schools.

Youth professionals may be more aware of the increase in violence than of their contribution to its escalation. Even the most caring adult is vulnerable to counteraggressive responses when his or her students exhibit violent behaviors. But relationships are transactional in nature, and professionals can easily mimic the negative characteristics of their students’ behavior. By understanding how conflicts escalate, adults can employ prescriptive techniques for disengaging from the process. Unlike much of the information available on the subject, this article attempts to focus on techniques for helping *adults*, rather than students, cope with conflict and crisis.

Understanding counteraggression includes understanding these four components:

1. how the conflict cycle operates to produce counteraggressive responses,
2. the escalating stages of youth aggression,
3. behaviors or stressors that trigger anger in adults and youth, and
4. strategies for de-escalating behavior.

### The Conflict Cycle

Developed by Nicholas Long, the Conflict Cycle is a model for understanding how interactions between students and teachers follow a circular process that mutually and continuously affect each other. According to this transactional paradigm, a stressful situation starts a chain of events that can

lead to a behavioral crisis. A student’s behavior following a stressful situation can directly influence the attitudes, feelings, and behavior of the adult. Left unresolved, conflict cycles multiply, intensifying the feelings and polarizing the behavior of both the student and the teacher. According to Wood and Long (1991), a crisis is really an uninterrupted series of conflict cycles.

### The process contains five steps.

1. *A negative self-image* in students makes them highly vulnerable to stress.
2. *Stressful events* are interpreted in a manner to cause
3. *uncomfortable feelings* which drive an emotional rather than rational behavioral response.
4. *The behavioral response* tends to be primitive, regressive, and defensive in nature, and often involves aggression directed at the adult. The aggression can take the form of verbal abuse, overt noncompliance to directions, destruction of property, etc.
5. *The adult reaction* may entail taking the student’s defiant behavior personally, and ultimately reacting emotionally as well. According to Long (1990), “One of the most amazing concepts of interpersonal relationships is that students in stress can actually generate their own feelings and, at times, their behavior in others” (p. 8).

The chances for successful outcomes from these negative exchanges are almost nil. Predictably, the behavior of both teachers and students often continues to escalate into more aggressive and counteraggressive interactions. Breaking the cycle is hard work for adults as well as students. To do so, the teacher must recognize the developing pattern and intervene as early as possible. This involves learning alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. This also requires constant rehearsal and reflection before, during, and after the incident.

### The Nature of Aggression in Youth

Youth exhibit aggressive behavior for a number of reasons and purposes. For some, their behavior serves as a way to control their environment and feel powerful. For others, aggression is the easiest way to get what they want. Taking the possessions of others may compensate for a lack of belonging or connectedness. Students who are unable to gain academic skills and rewards may find status in aggression. Others exhibit aggressive behaviors as a response to overwhelming feelings of frustration, anxiety, and/or anger. In most cases aggressive behavior serves one additional purpose of confirming a world view in which hostile adults can be made to show disrespect, anger, and ultimately counteraggression towards them.

Whatever the underlying need, adults must recognize that students are trying to engage them in power struggles which almost always escalate student behavior to more aggressive and

dangerous states. Unless we are aware of the transactional nature of this lure, we stand a good chance of being baited and hooked. The end result of this fishing expedition is a well-intentioned but frustrated and angry teacher who runs the risk of losing control and either threatening, yelling, devaluing, or harshly punishing students. Predictably, all of these possible outcomes will provoke further student aggression.

### **The Acting-Out Behavior Cycle of Students with Aggressive and Antisocial Behaviors**

Aggression occurs in stages. Students almost always show precursors prior to violent acts, and the challenge is to learn how to decode the behavior and intervene prescriptively. Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey (1995) describe a seven-phase process in which the interdependent dynamics of teacher-student responses can either heighten or de-escalate the conflict. Their model explains a coercive behavior process in which antisocial students carrying high levels of agitation can explode like a powder keg when triggered by seemingly innocuous events. They label their phases as Calm, Trigger, Agitation, Acceleration, Peak, De-escalation, and Recovery.

1. In the *Calm Phase*, a student's behavior is cooperative, compliant, and desirable.
2. In the *Trigger Phase*, the student's behavior involves a series of unresolved problems or stressors. If those problems are not resolved at this stage, students will move to the next phase.
3. In the *Agitation Phase*, behavior is unfocused and off-task. Agitation can be manifested by either increases or decreases in student behavior such as darting eyes, restlessness, subdued language, or withdrawal from groups.
4. In the *Acceleration Phase*, the student's behavior is teacher-engaging. This is the baiting stage with observable behaviors such as whining, avoidance, threats, verbal abuse, and destruction of property. If left unchecked, unsupported, or worse—met with counteraggressive reactions such as threats, yelling, or disrespectful verbal communications such as put-downs by the teacher—the cycle can escalate further.
5. The *Peak Phase* is characterized by student behavior that is out of control and dangerous to self and others. Assaults, self-abuse, and destruction of property are common. As the crisis ebbs, the student enters the sixth stage.
6. During the *De-escalation Phase*, the student displays confusion. Avoidance of discussion, withdrawal, denial, and blaming others characterize student behavior in this stage.
7. In the *Recovery Phase*, the behavior has run its course and returns to a nonagitated state. The person may still be subdued and defensive, particularly during debriefing. A student in this phase shows an eagerness for busy or independent work.

Knowing the seven different phases and the appropriate interventions at each stage can significantly reduce the frequency, duration, and intensity of violent acts in schools. It is

important to note that teachers can mirror the behavior their students display along this continuum, albeit usually with less intensity and duration. Sometimes by provoking teachers, aggressive or passive-aggressive students can get their teachers to mimic the entire sequence in the anger chain from agitation to recovery.

### **Understanding Stressors and Triggers**

Teachers must know both their own triggers or stressors and those of their students. Stress can trigger the anger cycle. Student triggers can be almost anything from a math problem that appears too hard to complete to a look that one student gives another. Typical teacher triggers might include being cursed at or having one's directives ignored. Frequently both teachers and students can identify the events which make them angry. If these cannot be easily identified through questions, a functional analysis of behavior serves as a useful tool for pinpointing the antecedents or triggers that ignite the anger cycle. Once the stressor is identified, a teacher can modify, eliminate, or learn to live with it.

### **Techniques for De-escalating Escalating Behaviors**

Teachers must use both *self-monitoring strategies* for dealing with their own feelings, behaviors, and cognitions as well as *prescriptive strategies* for helping students with aggressive behaviors during each phase of the anger cycle. Since interventions for students are available elsewhere, what teachers need to do to help themselves during each phase is outlined here.

**De-escalating Behaviors during the Calm Phase.** A teacher has four important tasks to accomplish when things are calm. First, the adult should focus on developing positive relationships with students based on mutual respect. Get to know them as people, focus on their strengths, catch them being good, and reinforce appropriate behavior. Second, provide effective, relevant, and motivating instruction. Third, develop a plan for managing each aggressive student's behavior in the classroom, which includes instruction in prosocial skills training, and share it with them and others who work with the youngster. *Aggression Replacement Training* by Goldstein and his colleagues (1987) is an excellent resource for teaching social skills and anger reduction techniques. Finally, develop a personal plan for self-control in which both personal triggers and a plan of action are identified. A problem-solving model which includes identifying the problem, brainstorming possible solutions, weighing the consequences of each possible solution, picking the best solution, trying it out, and evaluating its effectiveness is an important tool in the process. The plan must also include a system of self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reward. Once completed, put it in writing. Remember to monitor and evaluate the results of each stage in the anger cycle regardless of whether the adult's behavior terminates in the agitation stage or further along the continuum.

**Avoiding Counteraggression during the Agitated Phase.** Buddha once said, "Those who really seek the path to Enlightenment dictate terms to their mind. Then they proceed with strong determination." Effective teachers must implement techniques for de-escalating escalating behaviors so that they can help themselves calm down once a trigger produces an agitated response. These techniques must be rehearsed before the anger cycle begins under as real a set of conditions as possible to facilitate transfer of training. However, once a student's aggressive behavior triggers agitation, the most important teacher strategy involves learning to decode one's own behavior in order to identify the beginning of the anger cycle. Using self-talk such as "I'm beginning to tense up, my neck muscles are getting tighter, I must be getting angry" can serve as a prompt to begin the search for a de-escalating behavior or cognition. Next, focus on the first phase of the student's management plan for misbehavior. Interventions might include (1) providing redirection; (2) giving the student choices, stating the consequences of each, and asking the student to make a choice; and (3) giving the student a clear "I" message in which the behavior of concern, the feelings it produces, the effect it has on the environment, and the prosocial alternative to be followed next time are all identified. Having the plan written down can often help a teacher in this stage.

**Avoiding Counteraggression during the Acceleration and Peak Phases.** If the situation accelerates and a teacher becomes angry, he or she could try counting to 10, envisioning the student as a vulnerable child, imagining a peaceful spot or breathing deeply. Teachers can also tell themselves not to take the student's behavior personally. Using self-statements such as "I can control my anger," "He's trying to get me to play the game," and "Power struggling will increase the likelihood he will become aggressive again" may also be quite effective. If staffing permits, a teacher could temporarily remove the student to allow both parties time to calm down. Teachers should also follow their management plan for the student's misbehavior. Calling for back-up and putting the crisis plan into effect if the student is peaking are also important interventions.

**Avoiding Counteraggression during the De-escalation Phase.** The best strategy for avoiding counteraggression in this stage is to allow both the teacher and the student time to take space from each other if possible. If the student is compliant, he or she could complete independent work at his or her desk or in a quiet area. The teacher should not try to process the incident at this time. If staffing is adequate, the teacher can take a walk to calm down or compose him- or herself. If necessary, relaxation strategies can be very useful.

**Avoiding Counteraggression during the Recovery Phase.** The recovery stage offers an opportunity to reflect on the interactions, to review and monitor behaviors, and to evaluate how successful one's self-control strategies have been.

Teachers should keep an incident log in which antecedents, behaviors, and consequences are identified. The teacher should also reflect upon the interventions selected and consider how effective they were during the incident. Reinforcement for improvement in self-control should be provided or identified. Re-establishing positive contact and processing the interaction with the student using life space intervention and/or active listening techniques when both parties are calm are also essential tools in this phase. If transgressions in professional behavior were made, apologies can also take place here as well. Teachers must also ultimately accept responsibility for their actions and set a goal for improvement should the situation happen again. Processing these issues with supportive colleagues and members of the team is an important aspect of the healing process.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to help teachers with one of the most difficult tasks in education today, namely responding therapeutically to anger-producing situations with aggressive students. By highlighting concepts and interventions that can be applied at various stages of the anger cycle, teachers like Brigitte can avoid counteraggressive responses that serve no useful purpose for either participant.

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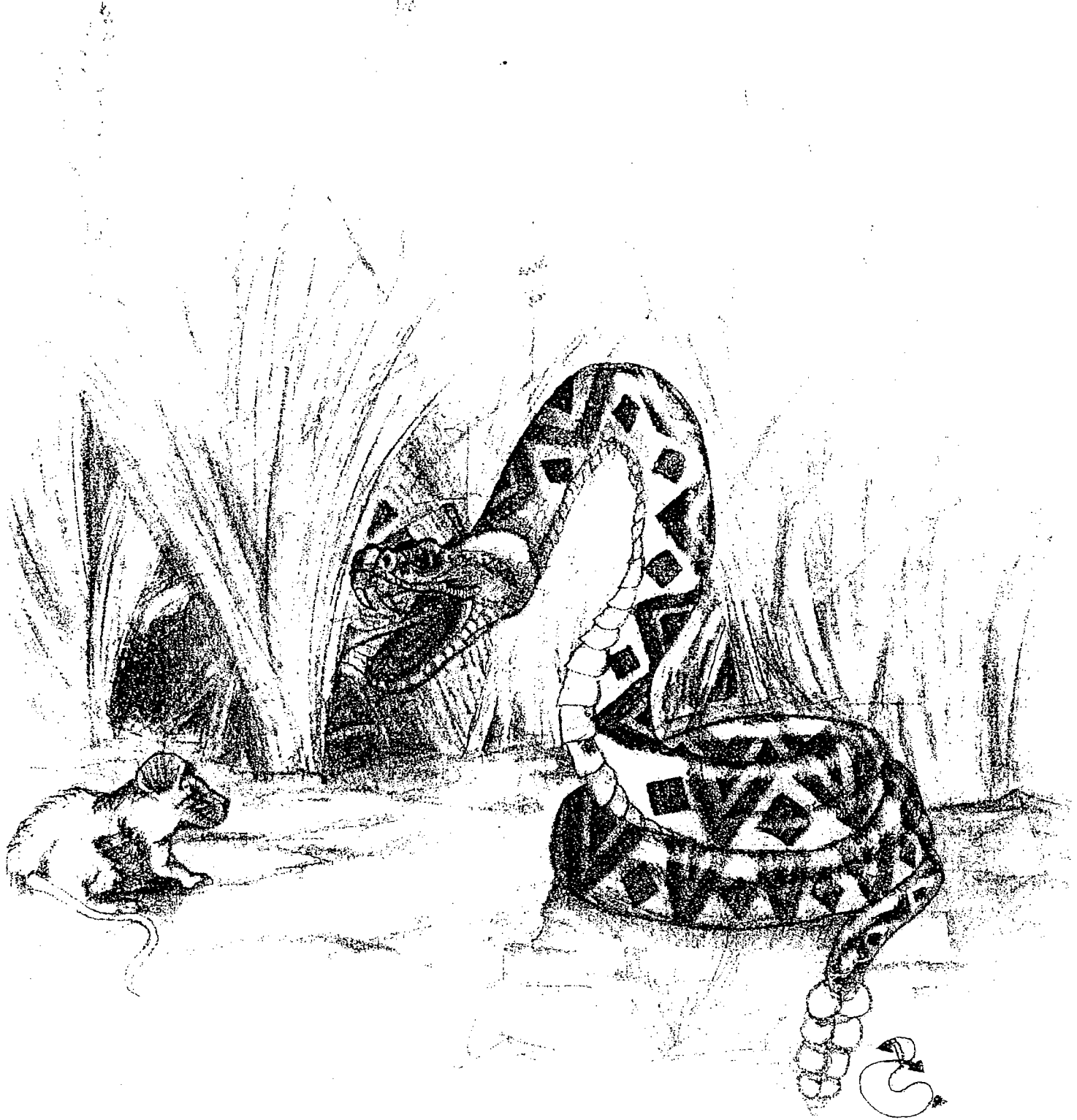
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