

De-escalation Tips for Interactions with Anxious and Defiant Students

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“As teachers we are 50% of every interaction with a child, so we have a lot of control over that interaction.” – Jessica Minihan (Schwartz, 2016, page 2).

“When anxiety is fueling behavior, it’s the most confusing and complicated to figure out.” – Jessica Minihan (Schwartz, 2016, page 2).

“Anxiety isn’t about ability, it’s about inference...” (Schwartz, 2016, page 3).

The following is a list of tips educators can use to combat the poor self-regulation skills, negative and inflexible thinking cycles, poor executive functioning skills, and the loss of social skills caused by anxiety.

1. **“Make Positive Attention Compete Better”:** Seek out and actively engage the most difficult student at the beginning of class or at the onset of each lesson to set up a pattern of predictable attention for positive behavior. Example: “I’m going to check on you in 5 minutes.” “I can’t wait to see what you think of this story.”
2. **Use Fact-Based Private or Non-vocal Praise:** Non-public praise makes anxious students feel more secure because of the lack of extra attention from peers. Example: Ask each of your students how they would prefer you tell them how proud you are.
3. **Teach “Waiting Now”:** When any person is anxious, it’s hard to wait. Explicitly teach and point out strategies students can utilize when there is downtime or wait time in the classroom.
4. **Pair Breaks with Cognitive Distractions:** Taking a break, such as a walk, doesn’t stop negative internal thoughts. Having to think of something else can interrupt “all or nothing” thinking. Example: Reading out loud to the teacher, completing a crossword puzzle, looking through seek and find books or seek and find sensory bag.

5. **Use “Finding Good Stopping Points” instead of Counting Down to Transitions:** Countdowns trigger anxiety and require executive functioning skills to fight the urge to keep going. Those with anxiety often “need” to finish or complete tasks. Finding a good stopping point prevents power struggles.
6. **Use “In-Between” Transition Activities:** Provide an in-between step that is more pleasant than an upcoming assignment or activity to create behavioral momentum. Example: After recess, have students do 2 minutes of coloring, drawing, or resting at their seat before taking a math test. That in-between activity gets the child to sit down possibly with a writing utensil in their hand. Therefore, moving to the test will be less stressful.
7. **Start Your Non-Preferred Lesson with a YouTube Video Introduction:** Watching videos is often a positive and preferred experience. Pairing spelling with letter or word videos or History with a 2 minute clip of today’s topic gets students engaged without thinking negatively about what they’re about to do or learn.
8. **Utilize Biofeedback Tools:** To visually show a student what it looks like when they are stressed vs. calm. Example: EMWave adds colors to visual scenes as students become more and more calm.
9. **Allow Students to Preview Homework:** Have an anxious child work on a few problems from the day’s homework with the teacher before it is assigned. Later on when homework is passed out the student will get their page that has some work already completed on it.
10. **Specifically Name and Point Out Strategies Students are Using:** This helps to add tools to a student’s toolbox that can be used independently. Praise and reinforce students for choosing and using a strategy.
11. **Promote Persistence Strategies:** These strategies can prevent dependency on the teacher. Examples: Skipping the hard ones, do the ones you know first, work with a buddy, double checking work.
12. **Teach Kids to do “Body Checks”:** Pausing to recognize and feel the physiological signs of agitation and stress. This should be done before a student loses control.
13. **Anticipate and Rehearse:** Anticipate activities and events that will likely be anxiety producing situations for your student(s) and practice a specific strategy that could be helpful for the student in that moment. (Making the strategy muscle memory).

- 14. Rehearse Replies to Confrontation:** For students who often are drawn into fights with peers. Preparing a scripted phrase a student can use at the moment. It may also be helpful to give them another action to do with their hands, if they are accustomed to physical aggression. Example: Saying “I don’t have time for this” and walking away, while clutching an object in their hand.
- 15. Use Data to Disprove Negative Thinking:** Poll students about how hard they think a task will be before they begin and repeat the same poll once they finish. Often things aren’t as bad as we think they will be. After a few data points, you can concretely show the student that they often view things more negatively than they actually are.
- 16. Use NonContingent Reinforcement:** Noticing and complimenting a child based on who they are or things they are good at, outside of your classroom, can help to change their attitude about the teacher. Praise doesn’t always have to be based upon school work.
- 17. Offer Leadership Opportunities:** All students have strengths. Finding a way for that difficult student to act as a leader can change that student’s perception of themselves. Example: Helping a younger student find the office, Showing off their non-academic talent, being a special helper, etc.
- 18. Avoid Yes/No Questions:** With this type of question there is a 50% chance the student won’t like the answer. Reword the question to make the result positive. Example: Student asks “Can I work with Joe?”. You know that won’t be a productive pair for the assigned activity. Respond with “Are you asking when you can work with Joe?” Then tell the students when it will be appropriate “You can work with Joe during free choice centers after lunch.
- 19. Allow Kids Time and Space:** Especially with students who are prone to arguing and power struggles. Proximity and vocal or non-vocal prompts are often asking for a response from the student. To correct distracting or inappropriate behavior, consider placing a note or visual cue on the students desk as you quickly walk by and continue moving away from the student.
- 20. Reward Practice and Use of Strategies–NOT Performance:** Focus reinforcement on effort, persistence, and trying things that are hard for students. You get more of what you focus on. If we focus on strategies, students will use them more often.