

Louder Than Words

Reducing Agitated and Aggressive Behaviour When Intervening With Nonverbal Individuals

Include Nonverbal People In Conversations.

No one likes to be ignored. Whether or not they can understand your words, non-speaking people know when they are being left out or discounted.

Take the Lead.

Initiate communication often. When you take the lead, you define the context of the conversation and are more likely to understand the person's response.

If you Don't Understand, Say So.

Do not pretend to understand a person's message. Instead, repeat back what you can and ask the person to restate the rest of the message. Be respectful and patient.

Redirect the Person, When Necessary.

You might have to repeat your message several times or break it down into smaller parts to ensure that you have been understood.

Set Limits With Immediate Consequences.

For some nonverbal individuals, the learning aspect of limit setting is lost when consequences are not carried out immediately.

DEALING WITH AGGRESSIVE STUDENTS ON THE SPOT

by: R. Ladson Berry, from *teaching for Excellence*, November, 1994

What most of us used to perceive as a problem in other communities is now at our front door. From verbal abuse to physical assault, staff members increasingly have to deal with angry and out-of-control students.

Anger can consume, and cause loss of, rational thought. Many a person has hurt another in anger only to be very regretful later when clearer thoughts returned. An angry person is only a moment away from potential physical aggression. Here are effective ways to deal with angry students – techniques which also apply to angry adults.

Awareness is the first key. First of all, we need to attune ourselves to signals of potential crisis behaviour. By being aware of such signals, we can help de-escalate the behaviours and protect ourselves and others.

Typically, there is a change in behaviour before physical aggression occurs. Verbal clues (what is said), para-verbal clues (how something is expressed), and kinetics (body language) indicate when one is beginning to lose control. An angry student may become verbally abusive, including cursing and/or threats. Voice volume and rate typically increase. Body language shows signs of anger, including body tenseness, pointing fingers, and/or leaning forward as if in an attack mode (including “getting in your face”).

When dealing with an angry student, it is of utmost importance to be aware of your own verbal and non-verbal behaviours. The way you respond to a person who is beginning to lose control can unintentionally increase the likelihood of physical aggression or decrease it. Here is how to respond verbally:

Remain calm and in control. When someone is directing verbal defiance toward you, the natural but incorrect tendency is to respond likewise. If another person yells at you, the automatic reaction is to raise your voice too. This tends to cause the other person to become even more angry. A calm reply and cool head are essential.

Listen to the other person and respond empathetically. Don't cut off a student. Listen to what is being said and validate feelings. Most (but not all) persons will calm down once they get what's bugging them off their chest. Interrupting and/or denying their feelings tend to accentuate the anger. When the person pauses, calmly say something like, “I understand you are upset.” Remain non-judgmental at this point until more information can be obtained and the problem is addressed.

Be aware of your para-verbals. The three para-verbal components are tone, volume, and rate. Remember, an upset person is beginning to lose rational thought, which means not focusing well on your actual words. Use tones of voice, which is calming. Avoid tones, which suggest impatience, disgust, or sarcasm. Volume should be moderate – not too loud or too soft. Speak clearly and slowly. Too rapid or too

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halting speech conveys agitation and loss of control. By speaking calmly and clearly, you are most likely to de-escalate the other's anger and are more likely to be heard.

Use a student's name. People respond to their name. If you know the other's name, speak it.

Set Limits. Give choice and consequences. This gives information to the other person for making a conscious choice. For example, to a verbally abusive student, you could say, "If you refrain from cursing, we can discuss your concerns. If not, this conversation is ended." To a student who refuses to follow your directive, you could say, "If you return to your desk we can go ahead with our lesson. If you do not, then you must go to the principals' office." Choices need to be clear, concise, and enforceable.

Next, we consider how to respond non-verbally. Non-verbals are probably the most important aspect of dealing with a potentially aggressive person. Body language typically conveys about 55 percent of our message, para-verbal communication about 35 percent, and verbal communication about 10 percent. When dealing with an agitated person, even more is conveyed non-verbally and less verbally.

Respect personal space - the area around a person in which he feels safe. For most persons and situations, it is about two to three feet. Entering an upset person's personal space intensifies emotions. As a general rule, keep at least one leg length away (about 36 inches) to prevent escalation and to increase your own safety.

Maintain an open stance. Slightly turn your body at an angle to the other person. Keep your hands open and in plain view. Do not cross your arms or point your finger. This stance is less threatening.

Make sure eye contact and facial expression are appropriate to the situation. Your face and eyes convey a direct message to the student. Maintain general eye contact, but do not stare through the other person. Know cultural habits. Some races consider it inappropriate to directly look at another person when upset or being disciplined. Your facial expression should be serious and not angry or fearful. You want to convey concern and control.

If you are attacked, use the least force necessary to protect yourself and keep the student (instigator and bystanders) from being hurt. Call for assistance. Increase personal space immediately. Dodge or deflect blows if possible. If grabbed, release by twisting away abruptly. With the help of other adults, safely restrain a student who does not stop physically acting out. By using the minimum force necessary rather than excessive force, you increase safety for all, and you reduce potential for litigation. The response needed depends on the specific situation.