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## 20 Tips to Help De-escalate Interactions With Anxious or Defiant Students



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APRIL 21, 2016

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Students' behavior is a form of communication and when it's negative it almost always stems from an underlying cause. There are many reasons kids might be acting out, which makes it difficult for a teacher in a crowded classroom to figure out the root cause. But even if there was time and space to do so, most teachers receive very little training in behavior during their credentialing programs. On average, teacher training programs mandate zero to one classes on behavior and zero to one courses on mental health. Teacher training programs mostly assume that kids in public schools will be "typical," but that assumption can handicap teachers when they get into real classrooms.

A National Institute of Health study found that 25.1 percent (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/prevalence/any-anxiety-disorder-among-children.shtml>) of kids 13-18 in the US have been diagnosed with anxiety disorders. No one knows how many more haven't been diagnosed. Additionally between eight and 15 percent of the school-aged population (<http://www.education.com/reference/article/prevalence-learning-disabilities/>) has learning disabilities (there is a range because there's no standard definition of what constitutes a learning disability). Nine percent (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/prevalence/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-among-children.shtml>) of 13-18 year-olds have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (although the number one misdiagnoses of anxiety is ADHD), and 11.2 percent (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/prevalence/dysthymic-disorder-among-children.shtml>) suffer from depression.

***‘We are 50% of every interaction with a child, so we have a lot of control over that interaction.’***

“So basically we have this gap in teacher education,” said [Jessica Minahan](http://jessicaminahan.com/) (<http://jessicaminahan.com/>), a certified behavior analyst, special educator, and co-author of *The Behavior Code: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Teaching the Most Challenging Students* (<http://www.childmind.org/en/posts/articles/2012-5-18-breaking-behavior-code-disruptive-students>). She spoke to educators gathered at a *Learning and the Brain* conference (<http://www.learningandthebrain.com/>) about strategies that work with oppositional students.

Minahan is usually called into schools to help with the most challenging behavior. She finds that often teachers are trying typical behavioral strategies for a group of kids for whom those strategies don’t work. However, she says after teachers learn more about why kids are behaving badly there are some simple strategies to approach defiant behavior like avoiding work, fighting, and causing problems during transitions with more empathy.

## **ANXIETY**

Anxiety is a huge barrier to learning and very difficult for educators to identify. “When anxiety is fueling the behavior, it’s the most confusing and complicated to figure out,” Minahan said. That’s because a student isn’t always anxious; it tends to come and go based on events in their lives, so their difficulties aren’t consistent. When we are anxious our working memory tanks, making it very difficult to recall any salient information.

Researchers surveyed a [group of first graders](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/15236317_The_significance_of_self-reported_anxious_symptoms_in_first-grade_children) ([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/15236317\\_The\\_significance\\_of\\_self-reported\\_anxious\\_symptoms\\_in\\_first-grade\\_children](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/15236317_The_significance_of_self-reported_anxious_symptoms_in_first-grade_children)) none of whom had any reading or math disabilities. Those who had been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder were eight times more likely to be in the lowest achieving group in reading, and two-point-five times more likely to be in the lowest quartile in math achievement by the spring.

“Anxiety is a learning disability; it inhibits your ability to learn,” Minahan said. But it isn’t usually recognized as a learning disability and there is almost never a plan for how to address it in the classroom. “For kids with anxiety, the ‘can’ts fluctuate,” Minahan said. “When they’re calm they can. When they’re anxious they can’t. And that’s very deceiving.”

Anxiety isn’t about ability, it’s about interference, which means that traditional rewards and consequences don’t often work with this group of learners.

“Rewards and consequences are super helpful to increase motivation for something I’m able to do,” Minahan said. But an anxious person’s brain has shut down and they aren’t able in that moment to complete the task being asked of them. The best way to combat this tricky problem is to try to prevent anxiety triggers and build up students’ social and emotional skills to cope with the moments when anxiety sets in.

When kids are in the throes of bad behavior they have poor self-regulation skills, often get into negative thinking cycles that they can’t stop, have poor executive functioning, become inflexible thinkers and lose social skills like the ability to think about another person’s perspective. That’s why kids can seem so unempathetic when teachers ask, “how do you think that made Sam feel?” At that moment, the student acting out has no ability to take Sam’s perspective, but a few hours later or the next day, he might be able to show the remorse educators want to see.

## **ALL BEHAVIOR HAS A FUNCTION**

Bad behavior is often connected to seeking attention, and when kids act out, they can see the results.\* “Negative attention is way easier to get and hands down easier to understand,” Minahan said. “It’s much more efficient.” Adults tend to be unpredictable with attention when a student is doing what she is supposed to do, but as soon as there’s a dramatic, obvious tantrum, the student has the teacher’s attention. And negative attention is powerful — one student can hijack a whole classroom.

A common teacher response to low-level negative attention seeking is to ignore the student. The teacher doesn’t want to reward bad behavior. “I want to caution you about ignoring someone with anxiety because their anxiety goes up,” Minahan said. Ignoring an already anxious student can accidentally convey the message that the teacher doesn’t care about the student, and worse might escalate the

situation. Perhaps a teacher can ignore a student tapping his pencil or banging on his desk, but threatening behavior can't be ignored. And the student learns exactly what level of behavior he must exhibit to get attention.



(<https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/stories-teachers-share-mindshift/id1078765985>) **TIP 1:** Instead,

“what you need to do is make positive attention compete better,” Minahan said. She often suggests that teachers actively engage the most difficult student at the beginning of class saying something like, “I can’t wait to see what you think of this assignment. I’m going to check on you in 5 minutes.” When the teacher actually comes back in five minutes, validates the student’s progress, and tells her another check-in is coming in ten minutes it sets up a pattern of predictable attention for positive behavior. And while it might seem unfair to take that extra time and care with one student, it ultimately saves instruction time when a teacher doesn’t have to deal with a tantrum that sends the student out of the room.

**TIP 2:** Often in an attempt to form a positive relationship with a student teachers will publicly praise positive behavior. That can backfire, especially with anxious kids who don’t want any extra attention from peers. Private or non-verbal praise is often better. Minahan recommends pulling students aside at the beginning of the year to ask how teachers can best tell them they’re proud. “It’s a gift to your February self if you can figure out a system now, otherwise you’ll get stuck on the negative attention scale,” Minahan said.

**Tip 2.1:** She also recommends fact-based praise as opposed to general praise. Vague praise is easy to dismiss.

## ANTECEDENTS TO BAD BEHAVIOR

Many kids have predictable anxiety triggers like unstructured time, transitions, writing tasks, social demands or any unexpected change. Similarly the antecedents of negative behavior are fairly predictable: unfacilitated social interactions, interaction with an authoritative adult, being asked to wait, when demands are placed, being told no, writing, and transitions.\*\*

**Tip 3:** “Teach waiting now,” Minahan said. “When you are anxious, despite your age, it’s very hard to wait.” She was asked to observe a boy who constantly disrupted class. Minahan soon noticed the boy often did his work, but if he finished early or there was downtime in the class, he would start causing trouble. When Minahan pointed this out to him he had no idea what “wait time” was. She had to spell out to him that when he finished a task he should apply a strategy, like turning over the paper and doodling appropriately on the back. After this small intervention the student’s behavior was so improved that his teacher thought he’d gone on medication.

*‘You can have really bright, able children whose anxiety is interfering so much.’*

For kids with anxiety, there are a number of strategies teachers can employ. The first is not to take any student behavior personally. The student isn’t trying to manipulate or torture the teacher, his behavior is reflecting something going on internally. Often a short movement break can help relieve anxiety, but not the way they are commonly given.

Minahan described a seventh grade girl who was recovering from an eating disorder. The girl was scraping her arms so badly they would bleed. After lunch, predictably, the behavior was worse, so her teachers were letting her color and draw to relieve her anxiety. Another common break is to tell a student to go get a drink of water down the hall. The coloring break wasn’t working for this seventh grader and Minahan soon figured out why. “We accidentally left her alone to fester in her anxious thoughts,” she said.

**Tip 4:** Leaving class doesn’t give the student a break from internal negative thoughts like “I’m fat,” or “I’m not smart enough,” which paralyze thinking. But a break paired with a cognitive distraction does offer respite from the “all or nothing” thinking that’s so common with anxious students. An older student might take a break and record herself reading a book out loud for a younger student with

dyslexia. It's impossible to read out loud and think another thought. Other distractions could include sports trivia, sudoku or crossword puzzles. Little kids might do a Where's Waldo or look through a Highlight magazine for the hidden picture.

**Tip 5:** When teachers want to wrap up a task they often use a countdown. "Silent reading time is going to be over in five minutes." But counting down doesn't support a high achieving anxious child who feels she must finish. And it takes a lot of executive function skills and cognitive flexibility to fight the urge to keep going after the time is up. So instead of counting down, a teacher might walk over to that student and say, let's find a good stopping point. She may stop a minute later than the rest of the class when she reaches the designated point, but it won't escalate into a tug-of-war.

Transitions are another common time for kids to act out. Younger students often don't want to come in from recess, for example. But when a teacher says, "Line up. Recess is over. It's time for your spelling quiz," it's no wonder the student doesn't want to go from something he loves to something he hates.

**Tip 6:** The teacher can give students an in-between step to make the transition more palatable. Go from recess, to two minutes of coloring, to the spelling quiz. The intermediary step gives that non-compliant student behavioral momentum. He's already sitting down, quiet, with pen in hand, so the jump to spelling isn't as jarring.

For middle and high school students, school is all about being social, but the only times students get to see their friends are in the two to five minute passing periods between classes. Again, the transition is from something they love to something they hate, so don't make that transition extra hard by collecting homework as they come in the door. The toughest kids are probably already not doing well in the class, and a reminder of the homework exacerbates feelings of inadequacy.

**Tip 7:** One high school geometry teacher started playing two minute YouTube videos about geometry as students came into class. It got students from the hallway into the classroom without thinking negatively and her class started to run more smoothly. She didn't have the same interruptions she used to, which made the lost two minutes seem worth it.

**Tip 8:** Minahan also likes some of the biofeedback tools that are now available, like the [EmWave \(http://www.heartmath.com/emwave-technology/\)](http://www.heartmath.com/emwave-technology/). A wound up student puts a sensor on his finger and calming down becomes a game. He might start out with a picture of a black and white forest, but as he calms down (and the sensor monitors his heart rate) the colors start to pop in. It can take as little as two to five minutes to completely calm a kid down when they can see the feedback so clearly.

"I like it because it's so concrete," Minahan said. A student with high functioning autism might not even know what a teacher means by "calm down," but with the biofeedback device she can see what it means.

## **WORK AVOIDANCE**

Minahan says it's very common for students to have trouble initiating work, persisting through work and asking for help, but there are strategies to help kids build the skills to get better in these areas.

"You can have really bright, able children whose anxiety is interfering so much," Minahan said. The anxiety isn't coming from nowhere; it's coming from prior experiences of feeling frozen and stupid. In that moment the child's working memory isn't working, so teachers need to find ways to bypass it until the anxiety passes.

**Tip 9:** One way is to let students preview the work for the day. In the morning, an elementary school teacher might work on the first few problems with the anxious child so she knows she can do it. Then, when it's time for that work later in the day, that child receives the sheet she's already started and can go from there.

**Tip 9.1:** In high school, teachers can give students with trouble initiating the preview as homework. Students can start at home without any pressure and continue at school. "Fight or flight is the worst when they first see it," Minahan said, so try to bypass that moment and prevent a breakdown.

**Tip 10:** At the same time, when the teacher names the strategies a student is employing, he is helping the student build a toolbox that can be used independently. Strategies might include, asking a teacher to help her start when she feels frozen, or asking to preview the homework. For perfectionist students, difficulty starting can stem from a fear of messing up. Give those students dry erase boards, where the mess ups can be easily erased. It helps when teachers treat the difficulty starting as a small problem and say something like, “Looks like you’re not initiating. What strategy are you going to use?”

*‘When I shift the reinforcement to skills, I’ve noticed the skills go up and that’s what makes the difference for the kids who have mental health difficulties.’*

**Tip 11:** Some strategies to build persistence include skipping the hard ones and doing the ones a student knows first, working with a buddy, and double checking work on problems that have been completed.

Giving help in class is often a tricky balance, especially if a student is too embarrassed to ask vocally. Instead of acting out because she can’t do the work, the student might raise her hand, pass the teacher a note or make eye contact. Then the teacher has to be careful not to give too much help. “We accidentally create dependency because we help so much,” Minahan said.

That goes for academics as well as behavior. Often a teacher will notice a student becoming agitated and dysregulated and tell him to take a short walk. But ultimately the student will be better served if he can learn to monitor himself and implement strategies when he notices early signs of agitation. “Kids have to learn how to catch themselves on the way up and calm down there,” Minahan said, because that’s when the strategies work. But kids need to be taught how to recognize the signs.

**Tip 12:** Teach kids how to do a body check. With younger students a teacher can describe the signs of agitation as they are happening so the student starts to recognize them. With older students, ask them where in their body they feel anxious, for example, “in your belly?” “Give them the data every day,” Minahan said. “This is your body on the way up.” After the groundwork has been laid, a teacher can just say “body check, please” to let a student know it’s time to check in with themselves and start using a strategy.

But what can you do when a kid is already exploding? Minahan says, not much because the child will have a very hard time reacting in a reasonable way once he or she is riled up.

**Tip 13:** What educators can do is anticipate those moments and rehearse self-calming strategies when the child is calm.

In one case, Minahan knew an elementary student she was working with was going to have a traumatic change in her life. The child’s mom was giving her up to foster care and the date had been set. To prepare for what would undoubtedly be a moment when the student couldn’t control herself, Minahan had her practice self-calming in the social worker’s office, where she would probably go on the day. Twice a day for five minutes she rehearsed a self-calming routine when she was already calm so her working memory was available and she was learning the strategies.



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and the child did freak out, Minahan quickly got her into the office with very little touching or verbal interaction which might further set her off. Once there, the girl got into her routine, and started singing to herself as a cognitive distraction. “The rehearsal allowed for automaticity and did not require cognition or working memory in that moment,” Minahan said.

**Tip 14:** Rehearse replies to confrontations. Minahan worked with a high school student who constantly got in fights. If he felt disrespected he’d start swinging. Together they rehearsed over and over him saying, “I don’t have time for this,” and walking away. During the rehearsals, Minahan gave him something to hold in his hands as he said this. And soon, he stopped getting in fights. It gave

him the moment he needed to make a decision not to use his fists and a go-to automatic reply.

**Tip 15:** Use data to disprove negative thinking. Writing is a common barrier for kids with anxiety, Minahan said. But one way to begin getting students past this hurdle is to ask them how hard a task will be before they start and again after they've completed it. Almost always the perception of the task is worse than the actual task. With several weeks of data you can show students the pattern in their responses.

Minahan worked with a girl who hated writing so much that she was skipping school twice a week. She would often say that writing was torture to her. Minahan broke writing down into component parts with corresponding strategies for getting started on each part. When the student worked on a writing task Minahan would ask her how many strategies she employed. Often the girl didn't use that many strategies, which didn't fit with her own conception of herself. "We reframed her whole thinking and she felt more empowered to solve her problems," Minahan said.

## INTERACTION STRATEGIES

In any interaction with students teachers can only control their own behavior, but that's actually a lot of power. "We are 50% of every interaction with a child," Minahan said. "We have a lot of control over that interaction."

**Tip 16:** If a teacher gets off on the wrong foot with a student early in the year, try randomly being kind to the child, rather than only giving positive attention based on his or her behavior. This kind of noncontingent reinforcement helps the child to see the teacher likes him for who he is, not because he does math well or reads perfectly, Minahan said.

**Tip 17:** In areas where the difficult student is competent, give her a leadership role. Maybe let her take a younger child to the nurse or start an activity club. This helps change the child's perception of herself and also her relationship to the teacher.

**Tip 18:** When demanding something of a student, don't ask yes or no questions and teach kids not to ask yes or no questions. In that scenario, someone has a 50 percent chance of being disappointed with the answer. By changing the question, the teacher opens the door for the answer to be diffusing, rather than an escalation of defiance. For example, if a student asks, "Can I work with Jack?" The teacher can reframe the question: "Oh, did you want to know when you could work with Jack? You can ask: When can I work with Jack." The student might not like the answer, but it likely won't produce the same explosive reaction as getting an outright "no."

**Tip 19:** Give kids time and space. If a student is prone to arguing, eye contact and physical proximity can escalate potential protests.\*\*\* For example, if a kid is humming in an annoying way, a typical teacher move might be to make eye contact with the child and shake your head to get him to stop. But in this situation eye-contact is non-verbally asking the child for a response, which he may be incapable of giving at that moment. Instead, calmly walk over and put a note on his desk that says, "please stop humming." Then run away and do not make eye contact with that student for a few minutes.

"The initial reaction is not pleasant and you have to wait for them to de-escalate before they can comply," Minahan said. Sometimes the mere presence of the teacher prevents that de-escalation.

**Tip 20:** Reward practice or strategy use, not performance. "When I shift the reinforcement to skills, I've noticed the skills go up and that's what makes the difference for the kids who have mental health difficulties," Minahan said. Ultimately, educators are teaching kids the skills and strategies that they can then use throughout their life when they're anxious, so rewarding practice makes sense.

The more teachers can empathize with students, teaching skill building and focus on preventing challenging behavior, the smoother the classroom will run. Often that means learning about the student in order to identify triggers and design new ways of interacting with even the most challenging students.

*\*An earlier version of this post overstated the connection between bad behavior and seeking attention.*

*\*\*An earlier version of this sentence highlighted only one type of negative behavior — fighting.*

*\*\*\* This section was updated to include the situations under which eye contact could make a situation worse for a student. We regret these errors.*



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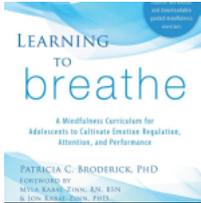
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