

Tips to De-escalate Anxious or Defiant Behaviors

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- * **Make positive attention compete better.**
Create a pattern of predictable attention for positive behavior. Actively engage the child at the start of an activity; "I can't wait to see what you think of this. I'll check on you in 5 minutes."
- * **Private or non-verbal praise that is fact based.**
Setting a system for offering praise based on what the child will best respond to will help to prevent negative attention. Vague praise is also easy to dismiss, so specific praise will be more meaningful.
- * **Teach waiting now.**
Teach children to apply a strategy when they've finished a task (i.e. turn over the paper and doodle). Never take a behavior personally; maladaptive behaviors are an indication of internal challenges or conflict.
- * **Pair breaks with a cognitive distraction.**
Negative thoughts like "I'm not smart enough" can be paralyzing. An activity that requires thought (i.e. *Where's Waldo*, reading out loud) can offer respite from "all or nothing" thinking.
- * **Replace the count down with "let's find a good stopping point."**
It takes a lot of cognitive flexibility and executive functioning skills to fight the urge to keep going. The child may finish a minute later, but it will prevent a tug-of-war.
- * **Give children an in-between step to make transitions more palatable.**
An intermediary step gives non-compliant students behavioral momentum (i.e. recess, 2 minutes of coloring, then spelling quiz).
- * **Preview the work for the day.**
Sometimes giving a student a worksheet that they've already started reduces anxiety about being able to complete the work.
- * **Name the strategy.**
When a child is struggling, helping them to identify a strategy to try can be helpful. Treat the difficulty starting as a small problem. "I see you're having trouble initiating. What strategy should we try?"



- * **Give students a leadership role.**
In areas where the child is competent, allow them to take on some leadership. This helps the child change their perception of themselves as well as their view of how the adult sees them.
- * **Remove the pressure of perfection.**
Mistakes can be overwhelming. Have students work out a math problem on a white board where they can easily erase their mistakes.
- * **Build persistence.**
Encourage students to skip hard problems, start with problems they know first, or allow them to work with a buddy. Give them strategies they can use independently so that they don't become dependent on adult help.
- * **Anticipate challenging moments & rehearse self-calming strategies when the child is calm.**
When a child is in crisis, they are unable to access cognition (reasoning) or working memory. Creating a familiar calming routine makes those strategies accessible when in crisis.
- * **Be randomly kind.**
Non-contingent reinforcement helps the child feel liked for who he is rather than the quality of his work.
- * **Avoid "yes or no" questions.**
With yes or no questions, there is 50% chance of disappointment. Avoiding yes or no questions helps to create the opportunity for a diffusing answer rather than one that will lead to an escalation of defiance.
- * **Give kids time and space.**
Even eye contact is a nonverbal way of asking for a response, which an escalating child may not be ready to give. Calmly placing a post it note on the student's desk that indicates what you would like for them to do gives them time to de-escalate before they comply.
- * **Reward practice or strategy use, not perfection.**
Reinforcing the child's efforts when they use a calming strategy will improve their performance over time.