

# **‘Defensive Behavior Management’: Advance Planning, Connecting With the Student, and Defusing Crisis Situations**

**Description:** Defensive behavior management’ (Fields, 2004) is a teacher-friendly six-step approach to avert student-teacher power struggles that emphasizes providing proactive instructional support to the student, elimination of behavioral triggers in the classroom setting, relationship-building, strategic application of defusing techniques when needed, and use of a ‘reconnection’ conference after behavioral incidents to promote student reflection and positive behavior change.

**Purpose:** When students show non-compliant, defiant, and disruptive behaviors in the classroom, the situation can quickly spin out of control. In attempting to maintain authority, the teacher may instead fall into a power struggle with the student, often culminating in the student being removed from the classroom. The numerous negative consequences of chronic student misbehavior include classwide lost instructional time, the acting-out student’s frequent exclusion from instruction, and significant teacher stress (Fields, 2004). Defensive management can prevent these negative outcomes.

**Materials:** No specialized materials are needed.

**Preparation:** Preparation steps are included in the intervention itself (see below).

**Intervention Steps:** Defensive behavior management is implemented through these steps:

1. **Understanding the Problem and Using Proactive Strategies to Prevent It.** The teacher collects information--through direct observation and perhaps other means--about specific instances of student problem behavior and the instructional components and other factors surrounding them. The teacher analyzes this information to discover specific ‘trigger’ events that seem to set off the problem behavior(s). Examples of potential triggers

include lack of skills; failure to understand directions; fatigue because of work volume; reluctance to demonstrate limited academic skills in the presence of peers or adults; etc.).

As the teacher identifies elements in the classroom environment that appear to trigger student non-compliance or defiance, the instructor adjusts instruction to provide appropriate student support to prevent behavioral episodes (e.g., providing the student with additional instruction in a skill; repeating directions and writing them on the board; 'chunking' larger work assignments into smaller segments; restructuring academic tasks to reduce the likelihood of student embarrassment in front of peers).

2. **Promoting Positive Teacher-Student Interactions.** Early in each class session, the teacher makes a point to engage in at least one positive verbal interaction with the student. Throughout the class period, the teacher continues to interact in positive ways with the student (e.g., brief conversation, smile, thumbs up, praise comment after a student remark in large-group discussion, etc.). In each interaction, the teacher adopts a genuinely accepting, polite, respectful tone.
3. **Scanning for Warning Indicators.** During the class session, the teacher monitors the target student's behavior for any behavioral indicators suggesting that the student is becoming frustrated or angry. Examples of behaviors that precede non-compliance or open defiance may include stopping work; muttering or complaining; becoming argumentative; interrupting others; leaving his or her seat; throwing objects, etc.).
4. **Exercising Emotional Restraint.** Whenever the student begins to display problematic behaviors, the teacher makes an active effort to remain calm. To actively monitor his or her emotional state, the teacher tracks physiological cues such as increased muscle tension and heart rate, as well as fear, annoyance, anger, or other negative emotions. The teacher also adopts calming or relaxation strategies that work for him or her in the face of provocative student behavior--such as taking

a deep breath or counting to 10 before responding.

5. **Using Defusing Tactics.** If the student begins to escalate to non-compliant, defiant, or confrontational behavior (e.g., arguing, threatening, other intentional verbal interruptions), the teacher draws from a range of possible deescalating strategies to defuse the situation. Such strategies can include private conversation with the student while maintaining a calm voice, open-ended questions, paraphrasing the student's concerns, acknowledging the student's emotions, etc.
6. **Reconnecting with the Student.** Soon after any in-class incident of student non-compliance, defiance, or confrontation, the teacher makes a point to meet with the student individually to discuss the behavioral incident, identify the triggers in the classroom environment that may have led to the problem, and brainstorm with the student to create a written plan to prevent the reoccurrence of such an incident. Throughout this conference, the teacher maintains .

**Adjusting/Troubleshooting:** Here are recommendations for using defensive management as an intervention strategy and addressing issues that might arise:

*Consider adopting defensive behavior management across classrooms.* Particularly in middle and high schools, students who are chronically non-compliant or defiant often display those maladaptive behaviors across instructional settings. If all teachers who work with a challenging student use the defensive management approach, there is a greater likelihood that the student will find classrooms more predictable and supportive—and that teachers will experience greater success with that student.

*Do not use defensive management to respond to physically aggressive behaviors or other serious safety concerns.* While the defensive-management process can work quite effectively to prevent or minimize verbal outbursts and non-compliance, the teacher should not attempt on his or her own to manage serious physical aggression using this classroom-based approach. Instead, teachers should respond to any episodes of student physical aggression by immediately notifying building administration.

## References

- Fields, B. (2004). Breaking the cycle of office referrals and suspensions: Defensive management. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 20, 103-115.