Practice summary

Australian Education Research Organisation

Responding to escalated behaviour

November 2026

Recognising and responding effectively to emotional and behavioural escalation helps keep students safe and supports them to return to learning.

Many factors influence students' emotional and behavioural regulation. Some students will still need targeted support to help them regulate their emotions and behaviour.

Emotional and behavioural escalation typically unfolds in a series of phases. Escalation can happen rapidly, with students sometimes reaching the peak phase without outwardly showing earlier signs of agitation. It can also fluctuate between phases, without necessarily following a linear path.

This practice summary introduces the key phases of emotional and behavioural escalation covered in the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) practice guide on preventing and responding to escalated behaviours. These approaches help teachers respond safely and effectively to escalated behaviour. They should also form part of a broader whole-school approach that includes shared plans and procedures.

This practice summary can be used individually to reflect on and refine your own practice or as a shared resource to support mentoring and a whole-school approach. It is designed to complement existing school and system policies, procedures and guidance.

For specific guidance on supporting students with diverse needs, see AERO's supporting students' diverse needs resources.

Key points covered in this practice summary include:

- recognising and understanding escalation phases
- responding safely and supportively during each escalation phase
- reducing triggers and supporting student regulation
- building strong proactive and preventative foundations.



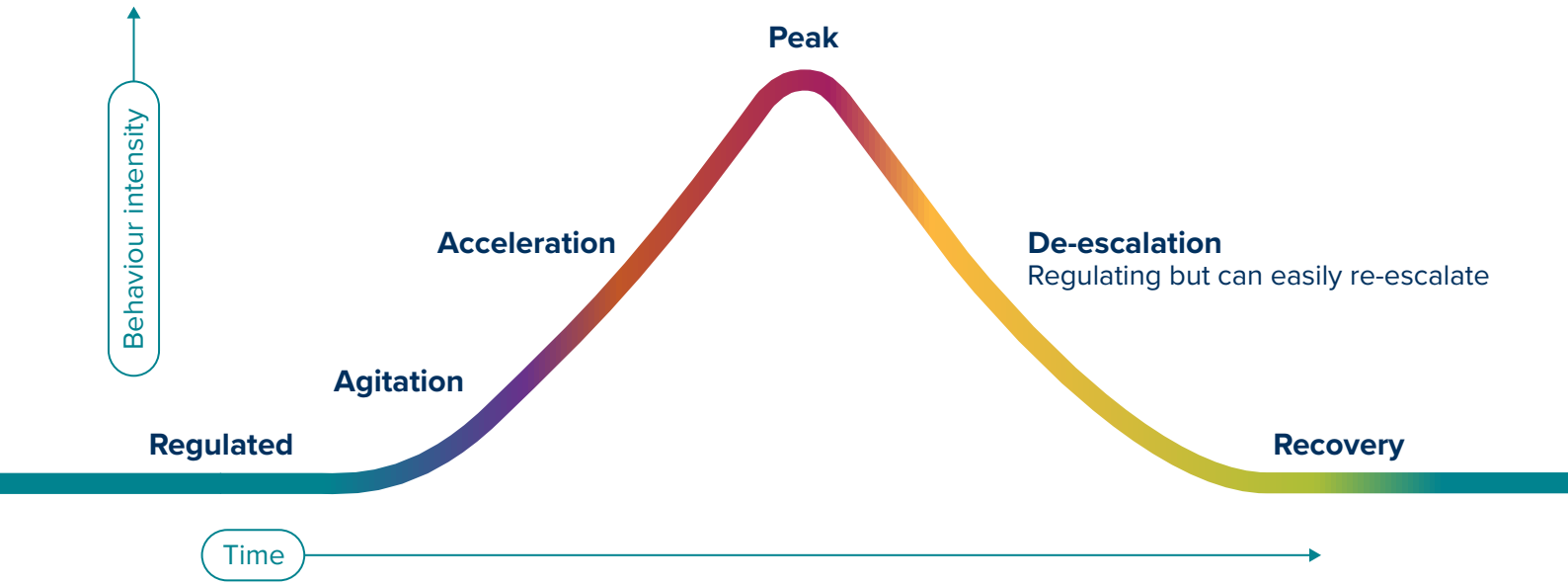
The behavioural escalation model

Emotional and behavioural escalation is a process where a student experiences a trigger that leads to heightened emotions. If these emotions aren't effectively supported, they can intensify.

As the student's emotions rise, their behaviour may also change. This could occur gradually or very rapidly. It might look like restlessness, withdrawal, refusal, verbal outbursts or physical aggression.

Escalation is often described as progressing through 6 phases (see Figure 1). A student may move quickly between phases or reach peak behaviour without showing earlier signs. Understanding these phases helps teachers respond safely, supportively and in ways that help the student return to a regulated state.

Figure 1: Behavioural escalation model



Source: Adapted from Colvin, G. T., & Scott, T. M. (2014). *Managing the cycle of acting-out behavior in the classroom*. Corwin Press, with permission from Corwin Press Inc through the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

Responses during escalation work best when paired with strong, proactive and preventative foundations. For an overview of these foundational practices, see AERO's proactive and preventative classroom management approaches practice summary.

Escalation triggers

Triggers vary widely and aren't always negative. Understanding individual triggers can help you plan ahead and reduce the likelihood or intensity of escalation.

Escalation triggers can generally be grouped into 4 categories:

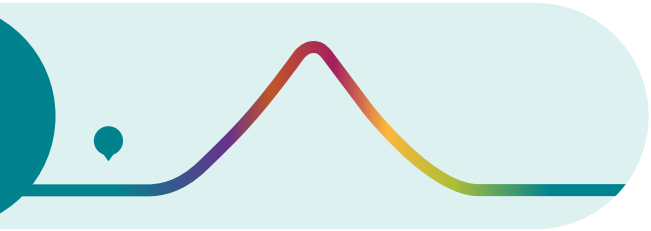
- environmental, e.g., changes to routine or seating
- classroom or instruction, e.g., unclear or inconsistent expectations
- social and interpersonal, e.g., an absence of trusted staff or peers
- cognitive or emotional, e.g., feeling unsafe or overwhelmed.

For more information and examples of triggers, see the escalated behaviour practice guide.

Responding to the escalation phases

The following provides a brief overview of each phase of the behavioural escalation model, along with guidance around what to focus on, strategies you can employ and actions to be mindful of to avoid further escalation.

Regulated phase



The student is calm and able to engage with learning.

Focus: Maintain regulation and prevent escalation.

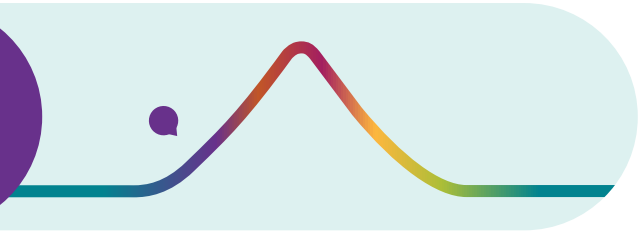
Strategies:

- Create a welcoming, supportive and predictable environment.
- Proactively check in with students who appear less engaged in learning or connected to others.
- Provide clear instructions, prompts and routines.
- Build behaviour momentum with achievable tasks.
- Offer short, supervised breaks when needed.
- Adjust the environment based on a sensory audit.

Why this matters: Prevention during the regulated phase is the most effective way to reduce how often escalation occurs.

Be mindful of: Monitoring your students for early signs of agitation.

Agitation phase



A trigger causes an emotion that a student finds difficult to manage and the student shows early signs of distress.

Focus: Reduce triggers and support the student to regulate.

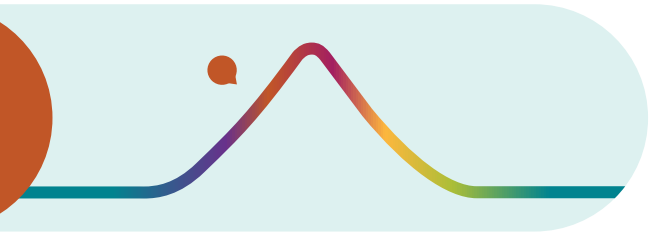
Strategies:

- Notice physical, behavioural and emotional signs of agitation.
- Approach quietly with a calm, supportive tone.
- Acknowledge feelings and actively listen.
- Reduce sensory load (e.g., noise, light, crowding).
- Offer practical help, such as coregulation, a brief regulation break or breaking tasks into smaller steps.
- Provide choices where appropriate.

Why this matters: Students in the agitation phase can still return to calm with the right support. Early, quiet intervention reduces the likelihood of further escalation and helps students practise self-regulation skills.

Be mindful of: Calling out the student publicly, raising your voice or discussing consequences.

Acceleration phase



The student's distress increases rapidly, and they begin to lose the ability to respond to support in the way they might normally.

Focus: Prevent further escalation and maintain safety.

Strategies:

- Remove or reduce demands and known triggers.
- Offer a safe, low-stimulation space.
- Use minimal, simple language and non-confrontational body posture.
- Give more time and space than usual for the student to process.
- Move other students away if needed and seek support.

Why this matters: Reducing demands and giving space lowers emotional intensity. Continuing to push for compliance at this stage can make things worse.

Be mindful of: Arguing with the student, crowding them, insisting on compliance or discussing consequences with them.

Peak phase



Student behaviour is at its most intense. Their ability to regulate, make decisions and process information is significantly diminished.

Focus: Safety for everyone.

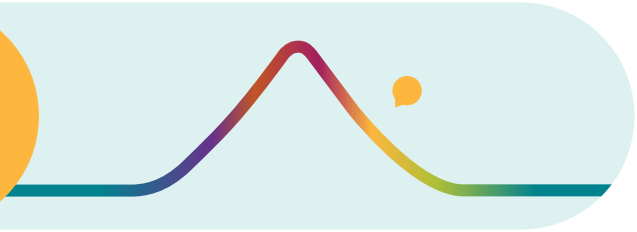
Strategies:

- Follow school emergency and critical incident procedures.
- Move other students to safety.
- Maintain calm, give space and regulate your own emotions.

Why this matters: In the peak phase, a student's ability to think clearly or respond to instruction is significantly reduced. Safety and space may be the only useful responses.

Be mindful of: Touching, holding or forcing response or movement from the student.

De-escalation phase



The intensity of the behaviour begins to reduce, and the student starts to return to a regulated state. However, they remain vulnerable to re-escalating and may feel disoriented or confused.

Focus: Reconnect and support regulation.

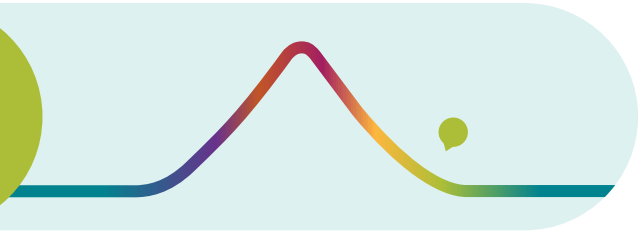
Strategies:

- Give time, space and minimal sensory input.
- Offer simple supports (e.g., drink, rest, quiet space).
- Protect student dignity by keeping others away.
- Listen, acknowledge feelings and allow silence.

Why this matters: A student coming down from the peak phase can re-escalate easily. Protecting their dignity and giving them time supports them to return to a regulated state.

Be mindful of: Discussing consequences or placing demands on the student.

Recovery phase



The student has returned to a regulated state and is ready to reflect, help plan preventative strategies and restore relationships and routines. This may not happen immediately – it could be after a break or the next day.

Focus: Reflect, restore and plan ahead.

Strategies:

- Debrief with the student when they're ready.
- Review triggers, what occurred and what could be done differently.
- Update the individual plan as needed.
- Support a dignified return to class.
- Record the incident and communicate with relevant staff and parents or primary caregivers following your school's debriefing and follow-up procedures.

Why this matters: Debriefing when the student is calm builds insight and trust. It can also help prevent the same escalation from happening again.

Be mindful of: Rushing the debrief or treating recovery as complete once the student returns to class. Continue to follow-up in the coming days.

Supporting your own wellbeing

Managing escalation is demanding, and supporting your own wellbeing is essential. For practical strategies on regulating your emotions, debriefing after difficult incidents and sustaining your practice over time, see the teacher wellbeing overview summary.

This practice summary is part of AERO's suite of classroom management resources and guidance for supporting students' diverse needs. It draws on content from the escalated behaviour and persistent disengaged and disruptive behaviour practice guides, which include detailed case examples and further guidance. For more information, visit edresearch.edu.au.

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