Practice summary

Australian Education Research Organisation

Responding to persistent disengaged and disruptive behaviour

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Understanding and responding to persistent disengagement and disruption helps students re-engage with learning. It also supports a more positive classroom environment for everyone.

Many factors influence students' engagement and participation. While proactive and preventative approaches form an essential support foundation for learning for most students, some will still need targeted support to help them engage, participate and stay focused.

This practice summary introduces a three-phase approach for understanding and responding to persistent disengagement and disruption. It draws on the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) persistent disengaged and disruptive behaviour practice guide. It 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's 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:

- identifying and understanding persistent behaviours
- supporting the student with targeted strategies
- collaborating with the student and parents or primary caregivers
- reflecting, adjusting and celebrating progress.



Three-phase approach

Phase 1: Identify and understand the persistent behaviours of concern



Describe the behaviour in specific, observable terms

Identify exactly what the student is doing, avoiding vague labels like 'acting out'. Note the impact on learning and any patterns: when, where and with whom the behaviours occur.

> **Rationale:** A clear description helps you identify patterns, avoid assumptions and ensure your response is grounded in what is happening.



Consider what might be driving the behaviour

Draw on all available information to consider how factors outside school may be affecting the student. This could include your observations, existing plans, and input from colleagues, specialist staff and parents or primary caregivers (where safe and appropriate).

> **Rationale:** Building a full picture before meeting with the student helps you have a more informed and productive conversation about the behaviours.



Speak directly with the student

Speak privately, allowing the student to bring a support person, if needed. Ask open questions about what they're experiencing. Don't rush – the student may not realise they're disengaged or know why it's happening.

> **Rationale:** The student's perspective is essential for understanding the behaviour and building the trust needed to support change.



Consider what the behaviour might be communicating

Reflect on what the behaviour might indicate. This could include unmet needs or skill or knowledge gaps. It could also be an attempt to seek or avoid something, such as attention, certain tasks or sensory inputs. Also consider whether adjustments to your instruction or tasks might help.

> **Rationale:** Understanding what might be driving the behaviour helps you identify the right support rather than just responding to the surface behaviour.



Involve others when needed

If the behaviour continues despite support, involve your student support team. For more serious behaviours, seek guidance from school leadership.

> **Rationale:** Collaborative problem-solving ensures the student receives appropriate support and prevents the burden falling solely on you, as the classroom teacher.

Phase 2: Support the student to focus on learning



Build belonging and reinforce learning-focused behaviours

Seek to increase positive interactions with the student regularly, checking in proactively and acknowledging their efforts. Offer specific, strengths-based feedback in the classroom that highlights what they're doing well and reinforces the behaviours you want to see more often.

> **Rationale:** A strong sense of connection increases engagement and reduces the likelihood of persistent student disengagement or disruption.



Support needs and develop skills

Adjust the environment, where needed; reteach expectations in simple, clear ways; and use visuals to support understanding. Offer calm prompts and brief check-ins to help the student regulate and stay on task.

> **Rationale:** Students stay focused more easily when the environment supports their needs and they have the skills to meet expectations.



Ensure teaching is appropriate

Ensure teaching and tasks are appropriate for the student's needs and provide frequent opportunities for them to respond and actively participate. Build 'behaviour momentum' by breaking work into manageable steps and starting with tasks the student can confidently begin, while offering limited, purposeful choices that maintain high expectations. Provide short, structured breaks to help sustain attention.

> **Rationale:** Targeted adjustments to task difficulty and relevance reduce the conditions that contribute to disengagement for the student.

A note on collaborative planning

Where possible, plan with students that need additional behaviour support rather than for them. Working together to identify goals, supports and ways to monitor progress increases ownership and strengthens the relationship. Involve parents or primary caregivers when appropriate.

Collaboration increases ownership, strengthens relationships and keeps everyone working towards the same goals.

Phase 3: Reflect on the impact of support strategies, celebrate progress and make adjustments



Review what's working

Reflect on the impact of your strategies and seek feedback from the student and their parents or primary caregivers.

> **Rationale:** Ongoing reflection helps you refine your approach and respond to the student's evolving needs.



Debrief with the student after incidents

Where appropriate, use simple, open questions to help the student reflect on what happened and what might help next time. For example, 'What happened?', 'What did you want to happen?' and 'What can we do together to make it better next time?' This conversation might be led by you or by a relevant staff member.

> **Rationale:** Debriefing builds insight, strengthens relationships and supports the student to develop self-regulation skills.



Recognise and reinforce progress

Celebrate small wins early and often and continue adjusting your approach as needed.

> **Rationale:** Positive reinforcement builds momentum and helps the student feel supported and capable.

Supporting your own wellbeing

Responding to persistent disengaged and disruptive behaviour 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 practice 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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