
THE 12 LEVELS OF INTERVENING IN DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR

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Teachers can apply 12 levels of intervention that effectively address disruptive behavior in a way that leads to eventual extinction of the behavior, while supporting social, emotional, and cognitive development. When implemented correctly, these 12 levels of intervention foster the development of self-control. Being unwaveringly consistent with interventions, from the first day of class to the last, is crucial.

Always start with the level one intervention first. When the desired change is not achieved at a lower level, add on the next level while continuing to follow through on the previous levels. Do not go backward. Use the levels in order, as needed, and do not skip a level.

If disruptive behavior is not extinguished at any one level, do not simply continue to use the same level of intervention that was successful yesterday. That is not leading the child to self-control. Rather, add a higher level. If a behavior was extinguished at one level yesterday and it reappears today, you must add the next level of intervention to reinforce self-control. To stop at a level that worked yesterday and not add the next higher level of intervention will tend to reinforce the reemerging behavior.

1 Give no direct attention to the unacceptable behavior. Any attention will tend to reinforce reoccurrence of the behavior.

In essence, ignore the behavior you do not want to see repeated. When disruptive behavior is not reinforced 50 percent of the time, the behavior will tend to move toward extinction.

If this first-level of intervention does not seem to be stopping the unacceptable behavior, continue to avoid providing direct attention to the behavior and add the level two intervention.

2 Arrange the environment to minimize disruptive behavior. The goal is to change the environment in such a way as to decrease the likelihood that the disruptive behavior will be repeated.

Imagine two children sitting side by side are kicking one another. Simply changing the seating arrangement so that these two children are not so close together may resolve the issue.

Make ongoing observations, throughout the school year, to assess the classroom setup. Even a subtle change may be all that is needed to support greater self-control. Perhaps simplifying the environment to facilitate more self-directedness will support children becoming more self-correcting.

As children achieve mastery of the environment, add materials with increased complexity so that children remain challenged. The environment must provide the proper balance of cognitive challenge and familiarity.

If, after continuing to give no direct attention to the disruptive behavior and rearranging the environment, the disruptive behavior continues, add level three.

3 Use neutral time to discuss alternative behavior to the disruptive act with the entire class. A neutral time is when the behavior is not an immediate issue. The goal is to rely on vicarious learning to facilitate self-control.

Waiting until a neutral time to discuss unacceptable behavior is important. Pointing out disruptive behavior at the moment it is displayed will tend to reinforce the very behavior you want to stop.

Waiting for teachable moments is difficult for many teachers. If they see a problem, they want to resolve it then and there. However, waiting for teachable moments is necessary so you don't give positive reinforcement to undesirable behavior.

Example: At story time, read stories about behavior issues. If a child is hitting and pushing, read a book that addresses that behavior and discuss socially competent behavior. Making reference to the situation in which unwanted behavior was displayed is useful but must be done in a non-threatening, non-judgmental way.

Example: Give a puppet show in which the characters show self-control. Puppet shows give children a chance to act out class rules that are expected of them.

Other examples: Use circle time to lead a discussion that revisits the class rules. Teach the children songs that address the problem. Show a brief film about the unacceptable behavior and socially acceptable behaviors.

These examples are not pointing fingers at the disruptive child. At neutral times, when there is no longer an emotional investment in the event, children will tend to be more receptive to open communication about the issue.

If the disruptive behavior continues, do not abandon the first three levels. Continue them and add level four.

4 Scan the room for children engaging in pro-social behavior and use an “I” message to commend the behavior. Example: “Maria, when I see you reading your book quietly, I feel so happy I want to smile!”

Search for neutral times to directly encourage pro-social behavior in a disruptive child. Do not directly address the disruptive child about alternative behavior at the moment the disruptive behavior is occurring. Doing so will tend to reinforce the disruptive behavior. Look for moments when the child is displaying a desirable behavior and provide reinforcement at that moment. For example: “When I see you sitting in your seat, Ethan, I feel so happy that I want to give you a high five.”

5 Start walking casually toward the child who is demonstrating disruptive behavior while pointing out an acceptable behavior by another child in the classroom.

If two children are fighting, for example, begin to walk toward them without making direct eye contact. Fifty percent of the time, this will be enough to extinguish the behavior at that moment. In the instances when it doesn’t, simply continue to walk in the direction of the disruption until you are standing directly beside the children. Stopping next to the child is the level six intervention.

6 Stand by the child for a short period. Your closeness may be enough to extinguish the unwanted behavior.

7 Stay next to the disruptive child for an extended time. Continue to explore how to enhance the effectiveness of the first four intervention levels.

8 Apply gentle, appropriate touch. For example, non-intrusively place your hand on the child’s shoulder. Applying gentle, appropriate touch may provide reinforcement for focusing on self-control. Non-threatening tactile stimulation may encourage the child to refocus away from disruptive behavior.

9 While still applying gentle, appropriate touch, use a verbal cue to redirect the child. A verbal cue is a first-person singular statement that illustrates the expected behavior.

For example, if a child is kicking the blocks, a verbal cue might be “I am going to put all the blocks back in their places on the shelf now.” The goal is to distract the child from inappropriate behavior and refocus the child’s attention on pro-social behavior.

Give the verbal cue only after first applying gentle, appropriate touch. Continue with the earlier levels.

10 Manually guide the child to undo the unacceptable act and redo the desired behavior. Use a three-part “I” message while assisting the child in doing the alternative behavior.

For example, if Denny hits Johnny, you might choose to gently guide Denny’s hand in patting Johnny, saying, “It is not like me to hit Johnny. I touch Johnny gently.”

11 Keep the child by your side for an entire activity, as you move around the room, until the next transition. Use a three-part “I” message to explain why you are limiting the child’s access to other activities. Respond empathically each time the child expresses an interest in doing some activity other than staying with you.

For example, “Alex, when I see you hit, I feel so scared that someone may get hurt that I am going to have you stay with me until I feel safe that you understand about touching people gently.” Or “Beatriz, when I see you pinch Josh, I feel so worried that I am going to keep you with me until I feel safe that you understand ‘I touch Josh gently.’”

12 Keep the child by your side for multiple activities, or as long as necessary to help facilitate self-control. Eventually the child will realize that if he doesn’t want to stay with the teacher all the time, he has to discontinue the unacceptable behavior.