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# Defiance and Verbal Aggression...

## *preventing and dealing with challenging behavior*

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*This Intervention Tip Sheet has been developed to assist teachers and parents in providing the best possible educational opportunities to students with emotional and behavioral disorders. This Tip Sheet was published by the Institute on Community Integration, College of Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis and was authored by Kareen Smith of the Institute.*

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### ***Introduction***

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Students who are verbally aggressive use words to get what they want, for example, to gain attention or avoid a task. In modifying the behavior of a student who is defiant or verbally aggressive, it is necessary (as in dealing with any other behavior) to perform a functional assessment before designing and implementing a proactive behavior modification intervention.

It is also helpful for one to have methods and techniques to deal with specific situations when a student becomes defiant or verbally aggressive. This tip sheet intends to give you a better description and understanding of defiance and verbal aggression, as well as several ways to deal with a student who is displaying these behaviors.

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### ***What are the characteristics of students who are defiant or verbally aggressive?***

Students exhibiting these behaviors operate on the premise, “I’m okay; you’re not okay.” “[T]he misguided social goal is [to] control, to manipulate others through language” (Wolfgang & Glickman, 1986, p. 267). Wolfgang and Glickman list the following behaviors as some of those in the defiant/verbally aggressive student’s repertoire:

- makes fun, teases, and ridicules other students.
- swears at other students.
- jokes and laughs when asked to be serious.
- “sassses” or is sarcastic toward the teacher.
- yells out with inappropriate comments during class instruction.
- gets into frequent shouting matches.
- laughs and is openly amused when other students are being reprimanded.

Fortunately, these students are rarely physically aggressive. A positive characteristic of these students is that they are attempting to communicate their feelings and desires, even if doing so poorly.

### ***How do I avoid being drawn into conflict cycles with defiant or verbally aggressive students?***

The defiant student’s “you can’t make me” attitude, along with both the student’s and teacher’s urge to avoid “losing face,” can easily lead the teacher to be pulled into a conflict cycle. In order to avoid being pulled into such a cycle, take into consideration the following (Chernow & Chernow, 1989, p. 151):

- **Decide if the defiance is momentary.** Many students will comply after an initial outburst if given a moment’s time. These students need to learn to control their temper and express themselves more appropriately.
- **Watch to see if the hostile behavior persists.** If it does, remove the student and/or yourself from the confrontation. Allow for a cool down period before dealing with the situation to prevent the situation from mushrooming.

### ***How do I bring about a long-term change in reducing defiance and verbal aggression?***

First, a functional assessment must be carried out in order to determine what purpose the aggression is serving and what circumstances seem to incite it. Then a behavior modification plan including proactive strategies should be designed, carried out, and evaluated.

While the strategies listed in this tip sheet will be helpful in getting you out of sticky situations, a long-term plan must be developed and implemented if you are going to help the student change. Not everyone will know or carry out the techniques listed above, and the student must become responsible for and in control of his or her own behavior. Please refer to tip sheets produced under this grant entitled *Token Economies, Differential Reinforcement, Positive Programming, Contingency Contracts, and Self-Monitoring* for ideas on strategies which can be useful in helping reduce defiance and verbal aggression.

### ***If I find myself in a situation where the student's behavior is out of control, how can I proceed?***

Chernow and Chernow (1989) recommend the following steps in dealing with a verbally aggressive student before he or she has calmed down to a degree that discussion is possible:

- **Tell the student that you will not argue with him or her, provide the student with a choice and leave the student alone, allowing time to decide.** Telling the student, "I will not talk to you if you are going to call me names. When you feel ready to address me with my name, I will be willing to help you/discuss this with you," and walking away leaves you and the student with some sense of calm and control.
- **Instruct a hostile student to wait for you away from other students, i.e., in the hall or office.** This will allow the student time to calm down so that you can engage him or her in discussion.

### ***What techniques can I use to engage the student in discussion when I suspect he or she is ready?***

**Reflection.** Reflection is restating in similar words what the student has stated. This helps draw the student into discussion by showing that you are listening and letting you check that you understand what the student is saying. Be sure to restate in a calm, nonthreatening, nonjudgmental voice.

#### **Example:**

Student: I'm going to hit Bob if he doesn't learn to mind his own business.

Teacher: You are very angry at Bob because he intrudes in your conversations.

**Agree with part of the criticism.** This technique helps neutralize an attack and deter arguing. In a calm, nonthreatening voice, try restating the criticism and asking for specifics. You must allow for the fact that while the student may not have expressed him- or herself appropriately, there may be some worth to the criticism. If the student is calm enough, ask what specifically he or she would like to be changed. If it seems reasonable, ask if the student will try to change his or her behavior if you try to change yours. If the student's suggestion does not seem reasonable, reinforce him or her for sharing it appropriately and let them know that while you may not be able to honor it, you appreciate being privy to it.

#### **Example:**

Student: You always yell at me for talking and never at anybody else!

Teacher: I do often have to ask you to stop talking because when I look up at the class, you often continue to talk.

**Question for specifics.** This technique helps the student break down generalizations and state him- or herself in more specific, concrete terms. It also helps the student focus on the actual problem rather than the people involved. Furthermore, it helps you identify strengths and weaknesses in the student's problem-solving abilities, allowing you to develop instruction in improving these skills.

#### **Example:**

Student: I hate math. These problems are stupid.

Teacher: Which part are you getting stuck on?

**Collaboration**. This technique gives both you and the student something you want from what could potentially be a conflict. It helps prevent a conflict cycle from ensuing and teaches negotiation skills and delayed gratification.

**Example:**

Student: I'm not going to clean up the art project. I want to go to recess.

Teacher: I'll pick up the paper if you'll put away the paints and brushes. Then you can go to recess.

**Direct/firm commands**. Direct/firm commands should be used in a crisis situation if they have worked well in the past or if you believe the student will respond to them. This strategy should not be used frequently as it does not encourage the student to take responsibility in making decisions. These commands are used in order to gain immediate control.

**Example:**

Student: I'm going to beat the crap out of you!

Teacher: Robert, sit down now!

**Distraction, redirection, or humor**. These strategies can be used in a crisis situation in order to divert the student's attention from the issue at hand. It permits a temporary reduction in anxiety, stress, and attacking or aggressive responses.

**Example:**

Student: If Toua touches my bike again, I'm going to wrap it around his neck!

Teacher: What kind of a bike do you have?

**Stop gap**. This strategy is useful when you find yourself becoming emotionally caught up in conflict with a student or when you sense that the student is unable to stop engaging in defiant or aggressive behavior because he or she is being controlled by emotion. This technique involves the teacher telling the student that they both need a break from each other until they are able to calm down. This allows both parties to bring emotions under control and prevents the conflict cycle from further developing.

**Example:**

Teacher: I feel like we're both getting angrier and having a hard time listening to each other. Let's put this aside for 10 minutes and talk about it after we've had time to calm down.

### ***Final comments on defiance and verbal aggression...***

These strategies require practice. They are not the typical responses we are conditioned to give to students who are being unreasonable or antagonistic. However, they can be very effective in giving a student the time he or she needs to calm down and in developing the student's trust in you by showing that you listen, care, and are willing to get involved.

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This publication was supported by Grant #H029K20171, *Special Project to Provide Technical Assistance, Inservice Training and Site Development for Positive Behavioral Support Strategies for Students with Disabilities* from the U.S. Department of Education. The University of Minnesota is an equal opportunity employer and educator.