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SED 612

Professional Reference for Reducing Confrontation and Escalation During Classroom Situations for Students with Moderate to Severe Disabilities.

The following is a ten point framework for special educators of professional things to consider, remember and practice when working with students with moderate to severe disabilities. The framework is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather as a relatively quick reference to review from time to time to become better versed at avoiding confrontation and escalation. Amidst the myriad of behavioral plan methodologies, expectations of progress, and challenges of meeting IEP goals, there is a common sense need to consider our approach as special educators when we are thrown off our plan by behaviors, responses, or results that are considered counterproductive. The only real way for any student to progress and learn is for them to feel comfortable enough to allow the learning process to take place. Too often progress can come to a standstill if confrontational situations are mishandled.

For the purpose of this document, it should be understood that when I refer to confrontation I am referring to confrontation that is negative. I based these references on an amalgamation of all that I have learned in my special education classes and in my four years of teaching art at my school.

The following paragraphs are a per-item explanation of the professional reference. I reformatted these explanations to create the quick reference that follows at the end.

1) The power of positive reinforcement

While it may be assumed by some special educators that students in special education have been cultivated in a positive learning environment with positive reinforcements (when they meet expectations), this is more often NOT TRUE. It is somewhat natural for teachers to tend to monitor and ‘call out’ bad behavior more than they monitor and draw attention to good behavior. Focusing only on ‘calling out’ bad behavior is a surefire way to invite confrontation and escalation.

At our school we use a system of green cards and tickets. Green cards are green index cards that we give to students when they do something that is positive. We are specific in writing the reason why the green card is issued (instead of just putting “good job”). Tickets from a big ticket roll are also issued for good behavior. We write the students’ name on the ticket and the students place them in a box so they can be picked later in our lottery prize drawing. You might be very surprised to see how
happy students are when they get a simple green card or a few tickets. Amazing.

2) **Develop a system of positive behavior rewards**

Determine a list of short-term and long-term rewards for each student or group of students that can be achieved when they behave according to certain rules or achieve a specific goal. Invite students to join you in the process of determining and picking the items. Everyone needs rewards for moving towards a goal. Students with moderate to severe disabilities are NO EXCEPTION. Be realistic and offer rewards that are within the established budget and practical. Often certain rewards can be based on the acquisition of points or tickets based on established goals.

3. **Communicate with others about ‘what works’**

One of the greatest tools educators have in reducing confrontation and escalation is to talk to other educators about ‘what works’ with specific students. We all get busy and sometimes fool ourselves into thinking that we don’t have enough time to talk to other teachers. Whatever. Make the time!! By taking the time to contact other teachers at appropriate times and sharing ideas about what is successful you will gain valuable ideas that have ALREADY BEEN SHOWN TO WORK. If educators only focus on how bad a student is or the latest chaos the student created they will miss the valuable opportunity to consider and learn what may have triggered the behavior or how it could have been handled differently. This process requires an objective, open mind that is willing to admit mistakes and self-assess. If you do not dedicate yourself to this process of communication and self-assessment the field of special education will be more difficult and frustrating for you than it needs to be.

4. **Develop and adhere to a posted routine/schedule**

Most experts espouse developing a schedule that can be posted on the wall and duplicated in a student folder/binder. A common source of confrontation occurs when students have difficulty transitioning from one activity or process to another. The use of schedules can greatly reduce tension and misunderstanding. Schedules that are specific and easy to read develop a sense of time that is meaningful, especially for students with moderate to severe disabilities. The use of symbols or pictures can strengthen connections between time and transitions. Developing schedules that are interactive can also involve students and help them to take ownership of time management.
5. **Research behavioral management philosophies**

   The skill-set involved in avoiding confrontation and escalation is critical. Confrontations can happen in a split second at any time and for many reasons. One specialist that deals with this topic in a way that I find very useful is Ross Green. Ross Green is the author of “The Explosive Child” and “Lost at School.” Among his basic philosophies is for educators to develop rapport with students especially when things aren’t going well. In short, he recommends a flat approach when teachers ask a student (away from other students and after the fact) what is happening. This open-ended approach is not designed to ‘corner’ the student, but rather to get them talking about what happened and why. It is a progressive approach that requires time and process.

6. **Become an expert on the history and evaluation of your students.**

   It is critical for special educators to, at the very least, read student evaluations and history reports. Special educators need to also become intimately familiar with IEP goals at the beginning of the process. Brushing up on student histories and IEP goals right before IEP meetings is not a satisfactory approach. This approach might make a special educator appear to be knowledgeable, but it cheats the true goal of developing strategies and curriculum that are appropriate.

   While it is not necessary that we learn every detail of a student’s evaluation, we need to be familiar with what is known and established. At the same time, special educators need to keep an open mind and remember that professional opinions are just that, opinions. No opinion can claim to be absolutely conclusive.

7. **Develop an Escape Plan**

   Due to considerations of control, some educators do not want to offer students with any means to get out of the classroom or situation. This can lead to a feeling of pressure and a sense of being trapped. Whenever possible, a system should be established so that students with moderate to severe disabilities who are having a significant issue can take a walk, be sent to another trusted person, or sit in a neutral place. Students should be ENCOURAGED to take advantage of these options, NOT AS A PUNISHMENT, but as a means to avoid getting in trouble or escalation. If this process is carefully considered and established it can serve as a great tool to reduce confrontation.

   At our school we offer students the option of taking a walk when situations get difficult and it is surprising how well it works.
8. **Don’t Fall into a Rut**

If you can’t come to work everyday with a positive attitude and be ready to do your part to make progress you may be in a rut. It is an undisputed fact that students rely on their teachers for guidance, support and trust. In order to be provide guidance, support and trust it is imperative that you be positive and do your best to exude a positive approach. Your positive approach will also result in better outcomes.

9. **Use language that is appropriate and straightforward**

Many issues involving confrontation and escalation come from educators using language that is, for different reasons, difficult to understand, involves too many steps, or carries sarcastic or snide tones. As special educators we have to be committed to improving our communication skills every day. With students with moderate to severe disabilities, our means of communication might also include symbols, technology, or sign language. When students do not receive the information we are trying to communicate the situation will often deteriorate into misunderstanding and confrontation.

10. **Establish expectations**

Every teacher has built-in ideas about what they are expecting from their students, but too often teachers do not convey to their students what the expectations are. Teachers can establish simple expectations on a daily and even hourly basis. When expectations are appropriate, attainable and adequately explained students have a better understanding of what they need to do. A better understanding of the expectations can relieve stress and allow students to take ownership of their behavior. This, in turn, can reduce (you got it now) confrontation and escalation.
Mr. Welch’s Professional Reference for Reducing Confrontation and Escalation During Classroom Situations for Students with Moderate to Severe Disabilities

1. Challenge yourself to ‘call out’ and acknowledge students who are doing what is asked of them. Do this everyday, all the time!!!

2. Be specific, organized, flexible, and good-humored about creating a rewards system that has short-term (each hour/day) and longer-term (each week/each month) elements.

3. Dedicate yourself to talking to other teachers, social workers, parents, etc. who associate with your student(s) about successful strategies used during confrontations or situations that escalate.

4. Create and manage a schedule that is easy to read, appropriate, specific, posted in multiple places, and interactive. The use of graphic symbols that are associated with each time block can be very helpful and fun.

5. Take time to learn about new behavioral philosophies. Be open-minded to try new approaches.

6. Become familiar with the written histories, evaluations, and IEP goals of every student on an ongoing basis. Take written histories, evaluations and IEP goals into account when developing strategies and curriculum.

7. No one wants to be trapped. Develop an appropriate option to allow students to leave the room and discuss the intended purpose of the option (to reduce confrontation and escalation) with students. USE the ‘out option’ BEFORE a situation escalates.

8. Be positive in the most earnest way possible. Be ready for positive results and don’t be surprised when they develop.

9. Be objective about how well you are communicating information.

10. Establish expectations that are appropriate and outlined clearly. Take advantage of establishing hourly expectations and longer term expectations. Attach expectations to goal setting and rewards systems.