
Prologue

Prepare Yourself

Two teachers leave a meeting of the Board of Education. They both hoped to persuade the Board to fund their programs. One got the funding, the other did not. One teacher says to the other, "I'm sorry I lost my temper. I guess I care about my program so much that my emotions got the best of me. Congratulations on getting your funding. I'm a little surprised, though. I thought that, ultimately, the program I supported was more beneficial to our district." The other teacher replies, "Perhaps you're right; I don't know. However, the side that stays calm is usually the side that is in control."

This vignette, an adaptation of an anecdote I heard once from an attorney (see Kapalka, 2007d, Chapter 2), illustrates a principle that is well known to those who work in professions and occupations that involve negotiations and conflict resolution (e.g., legal, law enforcement, legislative). Although frustration is a normal human reaction, those who experience intense anger have difficulty thinking clearly. Conversely, those who stay calm and remain in charge of their faculties usually end up being more effective in arguing their point. In other words, as you attend to your students' misbehaviors, you need to stay calm—but how do you do that when your students continually challenge your authority? To remain in control of your reactions, you'll need to understand how the anger response develops in your mind and body. This will help you develop the skills you need to manage your anger and prevent it from overtaking your senses.

The Emotional Reaction

Our brain is prewired to react similarly to strong emotions (e.g., anxiety and anger). When we face an oppositional student, the brain goes through reactions similar to those when we face physical danger. Let's review the steps involved in our experience of emotions.

Stimulus

The stimulus is not something over which we usually have control. It happens, like a charging lion or a frustrating student, and we must deal with it when it does. This is the first stage of our emotional response, and the remaining stages quickly follow.

Interpretation

Once we become aware of the stimulus, we immediately process the situation to interpret its meaning and importance. If that interpretation leads to a conclusion that we are being threatened, we act accordingly.

Physiological Arousal

Once a stimulus is identified as one that requires action, our body must mobilize its physical resources to be able to act in the most effective way. The sympathetic nervous system awakens and activates parts of the body that increase physical arousal to maximize our ability to perform an action. This physiological arousal includes the increase in blood pressure and heartbeat, redistribution of blood flow away from digestive organs and into muscles, sweating (to accommodate the increased metabolism in the muscles), pupil dilation, and an increase in respiration to oxygenate the blood. In summary, we physically get ready to face the challenge.

Response

With the body prepared for action, we next select a behavior. Usually, this becomes an all-or-nothing response as the body completes the chosen action as quickly and efficiently as possible. Thus, what happens after we become aware of the stimulus (interpretation, physiological arousal, and selecting a response) is collectively known as the *fight-flight* reaction.

Preparation

Actually, two more components need to be included in the process. Preparation is really the initial phase of the emotional reaction. If we expect to be challenged or threatened, we usually maintain a calm state of overall arousal, and switching into the fight-flight mode may take a little longer. Conversely, when we expect danger or

frustration, we are already on edge, and we are more likely to interpret events as requiring the fight–flight reaction.

Consequence

Our experience with outcomes of similar situations we've experienced in the past affects our behavior in the future. If we encountered a challenge but were able to conquer it, we will approach similar settings with a sense of confidence and comfort in knowing that we can handle them successfully. However, if a situation repeatedly challenges us and our ability to respond seems limited, we learn to expect the worst and experience much more baseline arousal when we encounter it again. This higher arousal makes it more likely that we will experience a fight–flight reaction in that setting.

Thus, when we talk about an emotional reaction, we must really consider six stages: preparation, stimulus, interpretation, physiological arousal, response, and consequence.

The Emotional Reaction of a Frustrated Teacher

In this book, the specific response of most interest to us is the anger and frustration that a teacher feels when faced with students who protest and refuses to do what they are told. Let's revisit the example of Barry and his teacher (Mrs. Smith), discussed in the Introduction, and identify the stages of emotional reaction that Mrs. Smith likely experienced.

Preparation

To start, the teacher was already expecting to have difficulties with Barry, and she likely was dreading the interaction. She probably recalled previous problems she encountered with him in similar situations and remembered the conflict and confrontation that often ensued. Probably, she already started the interaction with him by thinking, "This will be trouble, here we go again, why do I always have to go through this with him?" Thus, in the first stage of her emotional reaction, she had already prepared herself for yet another bad incident with Barry.

In addition, her prior feelings of frustration exacerbated her negative mindset. She likely felt upset that she had been failing to control her student, which made her feel angry. Teachers who have a difficult, oppositional student in their classroom often attribute the problems, at least in part, to their own failure to bring the student under control.

This belief further escalates the frustration and anger toward the student, and every additional problem serves as yet another reminder of the teacher's failure to control the student. Such mental "preparation" made it even more likely that she would react negatively to Barry's behavior, even if he really didn't act out in a major way.

Most likely, Mrs. Smith's body language and voice intonation signaled to Barry that she was already on edge. In turn, Barry probably reacted in kind, and this accelerated his escalation. Oppositional students are particularly sensitive to tense feelings and respond negatively when they encounter them (as observed, e.g., by Barkley, Fischer, Edelbrock, & Smallish, 1991). The more edgy and annoyed you appear when approaching your students, the more likely they are to respond aggressively, as if to "fight fire with fire." Consequently, confrontations will probably occur.

Stimulus

In the example in the Introduction, next came the stimulus—Barry's defiance, but careful examination of the sequence of events reveals that Barry was not defiant at first. Yes, he was reluctant to obey, but he didn't openly defy. The defiance became more evident as he escalated. Thus, the stimulus was really noncompliance, not defiance, although the teacher may not have interpreted it as such.

Interpretation

In the teacher's mind, Barry was at it again, and Mrs. Smith likely expected to have a problem with him, so she interpreted his response as a confirmation of her expectations. This interpretation escalated the situation further. Because she expected the worst, anything that Barry did confirmed those expectations. Short of saying "yes," almost any behavior that Barry exhibited was going to be interpreted by her as a sign of trouble. That interpretation, however, may not have been entirely accurate, and it unnecessarily escalated the situation.

Physiological Arousal

As Mrs. Smith became more angry, her physiological arousal amplified—her blood pressure and heart rate increased, her breathing became more rapid and shallow, and she experienced a boost of adrenaline (that may not have been consciously perceptible) that made her more ready for action. When a person is within such a state of arousal, she's physiologically and mentally ready to strike. As that

state progresses, it becomes more difficult to respond rationally. The person becomes more ready for a battle, and even minor annoyances precipitate an explosion.

Response

As the teacher responded to Barry's behavior with increased frustration, he picked up on her anger and also escalated his behavior. As the teacher got angrier, he reacted in kind. Eventually, the two of them reached a point of no return, and the situation became a confrontation. Along the way, Barry lost control over his emotions.

Consequence

We can speculate about what happened after this confrontation. Barry got yelled at yet again by his teacher, so he probably felt poorly about himself and the situation. Once again, he made her angry and unhappy, and other students expressed their disapproval as well. Although he may not understand the specifics, he likely recognized that once again he became involved in an unpleasant interaction that did not end as he would have liked it. In the future, situations like these teach him to expect the worst.

Likewise, Mrs. Smith probably experienced a negative reaction. The conflict she had expected happened again, and her feelings of frustration and anger at Barry escalated even further, so that she'll be even more ready for another battle in the future. The entire incident just proved to her that Barry is uncontrollable and will not respond positively to anything that she says or does. Once again, this only amplifies the negative expectation she will feel in the future and this mindset will increasingly permeate all of her interactions with Barry.

The Emotional Reaction of a Teacher Who Remains in Control

How do teachers break this cycle? There are effective methods of intervening in each of the six stages of emotional response to make a difference in how teachers react. Even if you're able to utilize only some of these suggestions, they will help you to stay calm. When you're calm, you can think more clearly. If you're able to utilize several of the suggestions, you'll experience an even greater difference in how you react, and you'll become much more effective in managing your students' behaviors.

Preparation

To start, you must avoid preparing for a battle. As Barry's example illustrates, if you expect a battle, you'll get one. You'll interpret each thing that happens as more proof of what you expected. Instead, prepare yourself for the possibility that the situation *may* escalate. If it does, you'll have the tools necessary to stay in control. Remember the examples of the two teachers from the beginning of this chapter.

To stay calm and in control, take a few deep breaths before you approach your oppositional student. It's best to take slow, deep breaths that last about four seconds, during which you fill your lungs completely with air. Then, hold all the air in your lungs for about one second, and slowly exhale to get all the air out. When exhaling, pretend that you are holding a lit candle in front of your mouth, and exhale slowly enough so that you do not blow it out. Repeat this procedure two or three times in one minute, breathing normally in between. While doing so, say to yourself, "I will stay calm. I will not lose control no matter what he does. It will be OK. One of us has to act like a grown-up, and it will be me." Not only will doing so help you prepare yourself mentally, but you will also maintain your pulmonary and circulatory function at a slower pace, making it easier to stay calm.

It will help you to remember that your job is not to get compliance at any price but to teach your students the consequences of their actions. Even if they don't comply, you haven't lost. True, it may be less convenient if you have to pick up the toys because your students refuse, but it doesn't mean that it will always be that way or that you have failed as a teacher.

If you recognize that certain commands and situations require more time and effort on your part, don't wait until the last minute to get into the situation. If your student does not transition away from play activities easily, do not wait until the last minute to begin to do so. If you feel rushed, your student will perceive this from you and be more likely to create problems—not because he recognizes that you are vulnerable at the moment and so he can take advantage but because he will perceive an added edge in your approach that will more easily escalate his mental state. Thus, make sure to prepare yourself adequately and give yourself enough time to address situations you previously found to be difficult.

Remember that you did not cause your student's tendencies to be willful or defiant. The student's dispositional tendencies, which are usually genetic, determine many of his reactions. Your job as a teacher is to help your student develop the good judgment to moderate these

characteristics and to be able to decide how much willfulness or defiance is OK to exhibit in any given situation.

Stimulus

From your vantage point, this is the one stage that you cannot control, because you can't stop your students from performing the *stimulus*—the action of saying something or doing something that is noncompliant, defiant, or otherwise inappropriate. However, even here, you can make a difference, although indirectly. By following the steps outlined in this book and remaining calm and consistent, over time you can help to diminish your students' behavioral difficulties because you will help them to develop better self-control. This, in turn, will help them process each situation and become better able to decide where to exercise their strong will.

Interpretation

This stage is absolutely crucial to successful anger control. How you interpret your students' behavior the moment that it happens will greatly determine your reaction. The more personally you take the behavior, the more likely you'll be to get angry. The more you feel that your students are misbehaving to spite you or just to get to you, the more enraged you'll become. Instead, view your students as goal-directed people who are merely trying to get their own way in the best way they know and that they easily lose control and become unable to suppress the urge to oppose.

Don't expect them to like what you tell them to do. Instead, help your students make the choice between positive and negative behaviors by helping them recognize the consequences that each choice will bring. Whatever your students' choices, as long as you administer the appropriate consequences, you have done your job as a teacher. Even if you have to pick up their items because they refused to do so, isn't a slight inconvenience worth it to be able to teach your students a valuable lesson about behaviors and consequences? Won't it give you a good feeling to know that what you are doing is preparing your students to be able to make better decisions as they get older?

Physiological Arousal

If you are successful in avoiding negative interpretations of your student's actions, you probably won't need to do much to control your physiological reaction. The body's arousal depends almost entirely on

whether you interpret that there's a need for you to get angry or excited in the first place. If you don't personalize or exaggerate your student's misbehavior, you won't experience the physiological arousal that leads to an anger outburst, and you'll stay in control.

Still, if the situation becomes volatile and your student is really pushing your buttons, there are things that you can do. When physiological arousal takes place, you experience a rush that happens very quickly. Although you may not notice it when it first happens, you can recognize it if you really try. With practice, you can become aware of your breathing becoming more shallow, your voice and speech changing character (when angry, people tend to speak louder and, usually, faster), even the rush you feel as your pulse and blood pressure increase. All of these can become signals that you are angry and must do something to calm down.

When you feel these changes in your body, it's time to walk away from your student. You do not have to leave the classroom, but walk away and take a few deep breaths in the manner discussed earlier in this chapter (a cycle of inhaling for four seconds, holding for one second, and exhaling for four seconds). While doing this, suppress any negative thoughts about your student—they will only escalate your anger. Although there are times when your immediate action is necessary (e.g., when your student is about to do something dangerous), in the most common situations with your student you'll be able to delay your response for a few moments until you feel more calm. You'll make a better choice of your actions and thus be more effective. As the saying goes, "somebody has to be the grown-up."

Response

When you respond, try to be calm but deliberate. Step 1 will give you suggestions of how to address your student. Do so directly and focus on what you want your student to do. Don't personalize or comment on your student's personality. Don't bring up past conflicts. Redirect your student to think about the choice she has between positive and negative behaviors and the consequences that follow each choice. Remember, this is a teachable moment, an opportunity for your student to learn from this experience.

If your student begins to have a tantrum, do not respond with anger. Stay in control of what you say and do. Remember that she is not singling you out to give you a hard time—she is simply losing control and can no longer contain her emotions. Step 3 will help you address these situations.

Consequence

If a confrontation has occurred, stay calm and try to think about what happened. Don't allow yourself to experience thoughts such as, "Well, there he went again, I knew this would happen." Similarly, don't blame yourself or feel that you caused the confrontation. Instead, try to analyze the sequence of events. What did your student say, and how did you react? Did he catch you off guard? If so, why? Was it a behavior that never happened before, or was it that you just didn't prepare yourself adequately for something that happens regularly? If so, make a plan for how to handle this same situation when it happens again—prepare yourself, stay calm, and think about your options before you initiate the interaction. Much of what you will learn in this book will help you address these kinds of situations.

Even though whatever you did this time appeared to be ineffective, you can learn from it and try to avoid doing the same thing in the future. Accept that people (both you and your student) learn by making mistakes. Without mistakes, we don't have the opportunity to try out what works and what doesn't. If what you tried didn't work, treat it as a lesson and think of what else you can do next time.

Avoid asking, "Why is my student doing this?" Instead, ask, "What can I do about it?" This program will help you structure the student's daily routine and make the environment more predictable for him, and if you continue to administer immediate consequences for both positive and negative behaviors, in time you'll reduce behavioral problems and help your student grow up to be a better adjusted, happier adult.

The Program

The forthcoming chapters present a set of tools that will help you address the most common behavioral problems that oppositional students exhibit in the classroom. Keep in mind that you'll need to implement each step gradually, and you may not see much difference after you've implemented just one or two steps. This doesn't mean that they aren't working. Gradually, positive changes will take place that may not become apparent until after you have implemented several of the steps.